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**Gerald Vizenor**  
Louis Owens, Guest Editor

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## *Introduction*

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Louis Owens

For more than three decades, Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor has been loosening the seams in the shroud of Native identity sewn by the American metanarrative, battling Euramerican tragic, entropic versions of Indianness with his brilliant and utterly original writings. He has waged his tricksterish word-war against nearly overwhelming odds, refusing to bow to the “hyperreal” commodification of Indianness that earns a writer commercial publication and popular success and instead adhering relentlessly to his militant oppositional posture. From the sixties, when he not only served as director of the American Indian Employment and Guidance Center in Minneapolis but also began self-publishing poetry and even created his own press to publish haiku, through the seventies, when he found his first novel—the extraordinary *Bearheart*—not merely rejected but “lost” by three successive New York publishers, to the present, Vizenor has been the publishing world’s ultimate outsider, bringing his words to print through small presses and university presses, and encouraging and enabling other writers to do the same. That he has gained world-wide critical acclaim and preeminence as the most original and critically acute of all Native American writers, while at the same time remaining virtually unknown among popular readers in America, attests to the rare nature of his achievement. That he has been the inspiration and founding impulse behind the American Indian Literature Prize, the University of Nebraska’s North American Indian Prose Award, and the American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series at the University of Oklahoma testifies to his unceasing commitment to Native American writing and writers.

Vizenor’s art is nearly always difficult, disturbing, disorienting, and disquieting, but it is never dishonest. It skewers all of us at one time or another, making us uncomfortably aware of the instability of our own terminal grounds and forcing us to question and re-question all creeds and

narratives. No one is spared the unavoidable self-scrutiny that comes with reading Vizenor, Native or non-Native alike. What does it mean to call ourselves or others “Indian” or “mixedblood”? What does it mean to define racial values, cultural mores, traditions? What can it mean to *define* anything? His poetry, fiction, drama, and critical theory foreground the serious playfulness of the Native trickster, reminding us at all times that indigenous Americans are born out of a timeless tradition of stories that create and re-create the world with each utterance. Vizenor’s writing might thus aptly be termed truly re-creational, as the world, in tribal trickster fashion, is born anew or re-created with each word, phrase, and story. No stasis, no tragedy here, despite five hundred years of painful history, but rather comic celebration of the human powers to imagine, create, grow, change, and, above all, survive. In Vizenor’s own words, “The trickster does no less in literature than to heal and balance the world. . . .”

Rather than offer a synopsis of each essay gathered here, let me just say that these works, with their range of both subject and approach, clearly underscore the impressive breadth and depth of Vizenor’s accomplishments. How many authors could inspire or require discussions ranging from haiku and Buddhism to questions of legality and tribal identity, dialogism and reader-response in fiction, “doubling of the great works of European literature,” and comparisons with Samuel Beckett in drama? Not just the quality of critical discussion inspired, but the very eclectic nature of this issue should serve as testimony to Gerald Vizenor’s unique and invaluable place not merely in Native American Indian literature but in contemporary world literature. To borrow a few words and neologisms from Vizenor himself, it is my hope that this issue of *SAIL* will serve as trickster’s backwards-walking bridge to the twenty-first century for this Anishinaabe post-post-modern, postindian warrior of survivance.

## ***“Interior Dancers”: Transformations of Vizenor’s Poetic Vision***

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Kimberly M. Blaeser

My insecurities were on the rise. I worried that my life would be miserable, reduced to a thin volume of poems.

—Gerald Vizenor, *Interior Landscapes*

Pulitzer-Prize-winning Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday has called Gerald Vizenor “a brilliant and evasive trickster figure” and “the supreme ironist among American Indian writers of the twentieth century” (*Columbia Literary History of the United States*). A. LaVonne Ruoff, scholar of Native American literature, has characterized Vizenor as a “formidable warrior in the word wars” and an “acute commentator on the hypocrisies of modern society” (“Woodland Word Warrior” 13). With a collection of over twenty single-authored works—the most well known among them in fiction or essay format—Vizenor the “trickster ironist word warrior” is less readily associated with his poetic works, works written mostly in the early years of his career. Yet Vizenor has been acknowledged as one of the foremost American haiku writers with two of his poems used to illustrate the form in Louis Untermeyer’s *The Pursuit of Poetry*. Ruoff, too, has noted Vizenor’s poetic achievements, praising his “skill in creating delicate and precise word pictures” (13). What links can there be between Vizenor the satirist and political activist, the Vizenor of trickster literature, and Vizenor the haiku master? What connections between the cutting sarcasm of his social criticism and the mystical reaches of his poetic voice? In fact, the haiku and free verse poems from this era introduce some of the language and many of the themes that became Vizenor’s trademark. In addition, Vizenor’s work in haiku and the reexpression of Anishinaabe dream songs has had important influence on his later style and philosophy of writing.

From 1960 to 1984, Vizenor published eight collections of poetry. Two (*Born in the Wind*, 1960, and *Two Wings the Butterfly*, 1962) were privately published; two (*The Old Park Sleeper*, 1961, and *South of the Painted Stones*, 1963) were issued by Callimachus; and four haiku collections (*Raising the Moon Vines*, 1964; *Seventeen Chirps*, 1964; *Empty Swings*, 1967; and *Matsushima*, 1984) were published by Nodin Press. Nodin, a press which Vizenor started and then sold after a year, also published *Slight Abrasions: A Dialogue in Haiku between Vizenor and Jerome Downes* in 1966. Vizenor's poetry, both haiku and free verse, has also been anthologized in such major collections as *Harper's Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry*, *Songs From This Earth on Turtle's Back*, *Voices of the Rainbow*, and *The Haiku Anthology*.

During the late sixties, Vizenor edited and "reexpressed" Ojibway dream songs originally collected by Frances Densmore. His work in this area was published by Nodin Press under the titles *Summer in the Spring: Lyric Poems of the Ojibway* in 1960 and *anishinabe nagamon* in 1970, and later reissued together with Ojibway stories in *Summer in the Spring: Ojibwe Lyric Poems and Tribal Stories* in 1981. Most recently, it was released in 1993 as a new edition by the University of Oklahoma Press, *Summer in the Spring: Anishinaabe Lyric Poems and Stories*.

From the outset, the Anishinaabe author has always exhibited a multi-faceted voice. His poetry contains in perhaps the purest form kernels of the wide range of voices and subjects which populate the Vizenor canon. From the caustic remembrance of "indian agents / pacing off allotments twenty acres short" in "Family Photograph" (*Voices* 37-39) to the playful image of "fat green flies" who "square dance across the grapefruit" in a haiku from *Matsushima* (unpaged), from the tragic account of a woman's suicide in "Unhappy Diary Days" (*Voices* 32-33) to the celebration of the survival of spirit in "Raising the Flag" (*Voices* 42-43), Vizenor's voice and poetic vision have always reflected the dynamic reality of Anishinaabe experience, contemporary and historical. His poetry, like his prose, issues at once lament, loud laughter, biting criticism, natural wisdom, and spiritual insight. He is, within his poetry, at once ironist, trickster, word warrior, and tribal dreamer.

In his introduction to *Matsushima*, Vizenor himself recognizes the multi-voiced quality of his work when he identifies the "four interior dancers" of his haiku dreamscape:<sup>1</sup>

The soul dancer in me celebrates transformations and intuitive connections between our bodies and the earth, animals, birds, ocean, creation; the street dancer in me is the trickster, the picaresque survivor in the wordwars, at common human intersections, in a classroom, at a supermarket, on a bus; the word dancer in me is the imaginative performer, the mask bearer, the shield holder, the teller in mythic stories at the

treeline; and the last dancer who practices alone, in  
silence, to remember the manners on the street, the  
gestures of the soul, and the words beneath the earth.  
(unpaged)

Soul dancer, trickster, mask bearer, and silent dancer—critics, too, have recognized the “transformational voice” of Vizenor.<sup>2</sup> A reading of his poetry illustrates the early presence of that voice in all its manifestations as well as the continuity between the early poetry and later prose works.

### I. Where Vizenor Soaked His Feet

Perhaps most enduring among the links between works in the Vizenor canon is the immediacy of his connection with the historical reality. The history of place, person, culture, or nation is intertwined with his own experiences. History in Vizenor is sentient, accessible, present tense. When, for example, he writes his collection of haiku about the “pine islands” of Japan, *Matsushima*, he records his own encounters within the context of the earlier observations by haiku master Matsuo Basho, places his work in the historical and literary milieu which contains within it the pulsing soul of that earlier exchange.

In his introduction to *Matsushima: Pine Islands*, Vizenor writes admiringly of Basho, records biographical information about the “master haiku poet,” quotes Basho’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (which also was written about Matsushima), and finally, characterizes Basho’s writing and Basho’s relationship with the “pine islands” (both of which became part of the inspiration for Vizenor’s own collection). Quoting from Makoto Ueda, Vizenor tells the reader how “at Matsushima” Basho himself “thought of bygone poets who had sung of the beauty of the island scenery . . . to commune with the memory of those with whom he felt he shared the same attitude toward life” (unpaged). Though those earlier poets were “dead and gone,” wrote Ueda, Basho is thought to have felt that “the surroundings were imbued with their presence and gave inspiration to the sensitive visitor.” Similarly, we are to understand, Basho’s work, attitude, and presence enriches Vizenor’s own experience of the pine islands.

In his autobiography, *Interior Landscapes*, Vizenor writes plainly of the inspiration he felt: “Matsuo Basho visited Matsushima and wrote in his haibun travel diaries about the moon over the pine islands. We were there three hundred years later and remembered the master haiku poet” (145). In a more recent essay, “The Envoy to Haiku” (*The Chicago Review*, 1993), he also claims the connection: “Basho visited Matsushima and wrote in his haibun diaries about the moon over the pine islands, the treasures of the nation. I was there three hundred years later, touched by the same moon and the master haiku poet” (59). Indeed, young Vizenor may have felt himself

heir to some kind of poetic or spiritual lineage in the work he was doing in haiku at that time, and may have consciously sought to carry that style or state of mind into his later prose work. He mentions in both the introduction to *Matsushima* and in “The Envoy to Haiku” that Basho was eighteen when he wrote his first haiku. He tells us in “Envoy,” “I was eighteen years old and saw haiku in calligraphy that summer for the first time, and read translations of poems by Kobayashi Issa and Matsuo Basho. That presence of haiku, more than any other literature, touched my imagination” (57). Vizenor began writing haiku that summer during his eighteenth year, and he notes in “Envoy,” “My poems and stories would arise as shadows” (57).

In *Matsushima*, Vizenor describes the seventeenth-century Japanese writer’s work this way:

Basho emphasized commonplace experiences in haiku, and the use of ordinary words in a serious manner. Through seasonal changes and elements from the environment his haibun and haiku connect the reader to the earth and to shared experiences in nature. (unpaged)

In his various descriptions of and discussions about haiku and “haiku manner,” Vizenor often characterizes the ideal in haiku similarly to the way he characterizes Basho’s work. He says, for example, that the words in haiku are “transformed in . . . simple experiences,” that haiku “ascribe the nature world,” that they “ascribe the seasons,” are “earth toned,” and that there “is a visual dreamscape in haiku which is similar to the sense of natural human connections to the earth” (“An Introduction to Haiku” 63; *Matsushima* unpaged; “Envoy” 58). Thus, rather than abhor any suggestion of inspiration or influence, Vizenor in fact celebrates the connection to Basho and his haiku tradition as clearly as he will later celebrate tribal inspirations. In “Envoy” he speaks of contemplating Basho’s most famous haiku (an ancient pond / a frog jumps in / sound of water) and records the poem he was inspired to write in response:

calm in the storm  
master basho soaks his feet  
water striders (60)

This poem, also the first in the *Matsushima* collection, expresses the clear sense Vizenor has of Basho’s presence in the very landscape. The prose “envoy” he would later write to accompany the haiku alludes to the enlightenment that comes with the poet’s moment of contemplation of earth voices and Basho’s spirit blowing through like the wind:

The striders listen to the wind, the creation of sound that is heard and seen in the motion of water; the wind teases the tension and natural balance on the surface of the world.



The same wind that moves the spiders teases the poets.  
(61)

Basho is as important a part of the physical reality, as inevitable a point of reference, for Vizenor in Matsushima as is Henry Rowe Schoolcraft at the Mississippi headwaters. Vizenor acknowledges the historical imprint of the man falsely credited with the discovery of the source of the Mississippi in a fashion remarkably similar to that in which he recognized the haiku master's more benevolent presence in the Japanese islands. In "White Earth Reservation 1980," Vizenor depicts northern Minnesota and the overlaid presence of Schoolcraft:

lake itasca dancers  
ten thousand winters at the woodland rim  
tribal families  
bearwalks at the source  
northern lights  
where schoolcraft soaked his feet (Bruchac, *Songs* 263)

In the preceding stanza of the same poem he writes of "invented histories" and "shadows" that "seep from the concrete." From the larger context of Vizenor's work, we know that Schoolcraft is for him part of, indeed symbolic of, those "invented histories" that cannot but "seep" into the present. Vizenor later writes of Schoolcraft, for example, in *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories* where he characterizes the treaty commissioner and Indian agent as an "arrogant" man who "invented the 'Algic tribes'" and used his tribal acquaintances in his search for copper and for status as an Indian expert (17, 41-42).

But the historical milieu of Vizenor's work is populated by a diverse and complex range of presences. The same stanza that summons a recollection of Schoolcraft, for example, introduces the long native investment in place—"ten thousand winters at the woodland rim." Other passages in the poem recall "federal agents," "medicine bundles," "mission ruins," "totems," "jesuits," and "general allotment." They also allude to the natural history of the place: "the late october sun," "river moons," and "northern lights." Indeed, poems like "White Earth Reservation" characterize for us the layers of historical reality that combine to create the multifaceted place and voice that become the shifting baroque of Vizenor's work. The places where these shadows or layers of history seep from the earth and pool—White Earth, Matsushima, Sand Creek, and later China—are the metaphorical places where Vizenor soaked his feet.

## II. The Same Moon, The Same Wind

Just as Vizenor acknowledges the spiritual and historical intersections

in the experiences that inspire his poetry, we can trace the intersections between his poetry and prose, the transformations of those poetic moments into larger works of prose. Not only do the same visionary winds blow through the Vizenor canon, but his early poetic engagement left its mark on his prose form as well; story dynamics repeat themselves, phrases and scenes reappear in multiple echoes and transformations, and the same thematic moons shine through.

For example, Vizenor writes in *Matsushima* and in “Envoy” of Matsuo Basho’s *haibun*, which he describes as “a form of prose ‘written in the spirit of haiku’” (*Matsushima* unpagged). The *haibun* might be recognized, of course, as a source of inspiration for Vizenor’s recent experiments in prose envoys (such as the one previously quoted). In fact, the very idea of the *haibun* form, taken together with Vizenor’s extensive work in haiku itself, might also have exerted a more broad influence on his prose creations as might his involvement in “reexpressing” tribal dream songs.

Both haiku and dream songs are tightly constructed poetic units with vivid images (often of nature) and with little commentary, meant to transport the reader beyond the words to an experience or what Vizenor calls a “dreamscape.” There are many instances where Vizenor’s prose resembles the haiku structure, even more where it functions in a similar fashion: presenting tight imagery, setting scenes in nature, withholding commentary. Vizenor says his envoys combine “experiences in haiku with natural reason in tribal literature” and he calls them “a new haiku hermeneutics” (“Envoy” 60). Indeed, the same might be said for other passages in his prose. One of the best examples comes from the opening of *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* and actually fits the seventeen-syllable, three-line form of haiku (although not the classic five-seven-five pattern): “Cedarfair circus in the morning. Clown crows. Incense from moist cedar” (1). The dynamics of the passage also closely resemble the working of much of Vizenor’s haiku as it first evokes a sense of time and place, next adds the presence of animal life and a tribal consciousness, and finally, enlivens the scene with spiritual significance.<sup>3</sup> Vizenor’s poetic experience seems here to have clearly affected the form of his prose.

The vision of interrelationships apparent in Vizenor’s blending of haiku and tribal inspirations in poetry and prose, together with his sense of historical events, stories and cultures merging, create a unique vision that often bridges his movement from poetry to prose. Perhaps the blurring of experiential boundaries eases the crossover of genre divisions. The legacy of the crane clan and of his murdered father William Clement Vizenor, for example, loom large for Vizenor. They inspire early poems like “Long After the Rivers Change” (Tvedten 46) where Vizenor exhorts, “Breathe again young Indian / . . . With the sacred way of the Crane / And praise of your

father Keeshkemun!"<sup>4</sup> They inspire later poems like "Family Photograph" (Rosen 37-39) which alludes to the picture of young Vizenor and his father, a photograph used on the cover of Vizenor's autobiography, *Interior Landscapes*. In "Family Photograph" Vizenor writes of Clement Vizenor: "among trees / my father was a spruce;" and he traces in his father's life a pattern typical of many Anishinaabe people of that era: "corded for tribal pulp / he left white earth reservation / colonial genealogies / taking up the city at twenty-three." Here Vizenor recognizes in the fate of the timber resources and the Anishinaabe people the same "clear-cutting" by greedy colonial interests, and linking the two metaphorically, he pictures his father "running / low through the stumps at night." The imagery reappears in poems such as "White Earth Reservation 1980" ("general allotment stumps") (Bruchac 262-63) and in a poem called "Tribal Stumps" (Rosen 332) where Vizenor writes of the "tribal mixed bloods" as "new warriors" and describes their nightly battles: "my father returns / with all the mixed bloods / tribal stumps / from the blood-soaked beams of the city." Later, of course, Vizenor again links tribal people and their timber resources (this time sacred cedar trees) in his first novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, where the greed of timber interests becomes one of the key plot elements.

Despite the sometimes dark vision of history Vizenor records, in his works his tribal "heirs" also inherit hope. In "Family Photograph" the hope actually comes from belief in the power of interrelationships or continuance and rests with the mixedblood or crossblood poet himself: "the new spruce / half white / half immigrant." The same sense of connection, of tribal and familial legacy is expressed in the opening genealogically-shaped chapter of Vizenor's autobiography, and the merging of identity seems well served by a merging of genres when the poem "Family Photograph" itself appears in the third chapter in revised form as "The Last Photograph." The very title of that chapter, "Measuring My Blood," comes from a line which appears in both versions of the poem and alludes to young Clement Beaulieu's sexual encounters with various women in the city and implies, of course, the passage of his blood legacy to his son. Vizenor's repeated merging of his father's urban murder story with that of the tribal trickster Naanabozho's encounter with the evil gambler (treated frequently in Vizenor's prose) also has an early manifestation in "Family Photograph" where he depicts his father as "taking up the city and losing at cards." Again, this dark vision is tempered in Vizenor. The loss, we come to understand, is only temporary since the saga of the Evil Gambler continues with the next generation, notably our trickster poet's prose persona in such works as *Earthdivers: Tribal Narratives on Mixed Descent* and *Wordarrows: Indians and Writers in the New Fur Trade*.

As a reading of even these few poems indicates, the crossovers between and imaginative commingling of tribal mythic accounts, historical stories, family history, and personal stories, as well as the blending of experiences and stories from several cultural sources—characteristic Vizenor techniques—surface early in his poetry. With the seeds of Vizenor’s techniques, we also find numerous verbal and thematic Vizenor “signatures” in his poetry. Links between his poetry and prose include such classic “Vizenorese” as “at the treelines,” “at the seams,” “culture cultists,” “at the centerfolds,” “the little people,” and “invented histories.” His poems include his usage of phrases like “touchwood,” “downtown on the reservation,” and “empty swings,” each of which was also used as a title for a book or article. They include scenes like the encounter with a tribal women who sees the vision of a sacred flag (“Raising the Flag,” Rosen 42-43). Culled from Vizenor’s experience while executive director of the American Indian Employment and Guidance Center in Minneapolis, this incident was to be reexpressed in several prose versions by Vizenor over the years beginning in his introduction to *Wordarrows* in 1978. Similarly, the image of a tribal veteran from the poem “Indians at the Guthrie” was to be fleshed out in various versions of a short story called, in its 1984 variation, “Rattling Hail Ceremonial: Cultural Word Wars Downtown on the Reservation.” Likewise, the multiple references to Sand Creek in Vizenor’s poetry and his symbolic use of that massacre find fuller development in “Sand Creek Survivors” in his 1981 *Earthdivers*.

Many of these phrases, scenes, and poems also introduce important themes, of course; and it is in the early treatment of what were to become his major preoccupations that Vizenor’s poetry offers perhaps the richest insights. Naanabozho, the tribal trickster whose appearance in character and dynamic often serves to distinguish Vizenor’s prose, makes several short appearances in his poems as well. In “White Earth Reservation 1980,” for example, Vizenor writes, “tribal tricksters / roam on the rearview mirror” (Bruchac 262), and “Auras on the Interstates” invites us to “follow the trickroutes / homewardbound in darkness” (Bruchac 265-66). But it is in Vizenor’s haiku where the “street dancer. . . the trickster, the picaresque survivor in the wordwars” (*Matsushima* unpagged) makes his presence most apparent, offering a trickster perspective, an illuminating twist, an echo of our own folly, or an invitation to reconsider our actions. In this haiku from *Empty Swings*, for example, we learn a lesson from the scolding blackbirds who earn their isolation:

Blackbirds scolding  
One by one the turtles slip away  
Alone again. (unpagged)

These kinds of playful revelations appear throughout Vizenor's haiku collections as they do in his later essays and, of course, his "trickster fiction." Later prose works also advance the important theoretical bases for Vizenor's strong belief in the power of trickster humor, but these early embodiments remain invaluable in understanding and tracing the development of Vizenor's "trickster signature."

Other classic Vizenor themes also find first voice in his poetry. In work after work, for example, he decries the destruction of resources, the "wordwound" artificiality of our existence, and the museumization of the romantic invented Indian. His poems, one after another, lament the same: "Minnesota Camp Grounds" reports how "white armies / claim the woodland lakes" and "praise aluminum and ice / plastic flowers" while butterflies are "dead on the grill of a brown camero," deer are "imprisoned" and lake water, too, is "dead" (Bruchac 265). "Auras on the Interstates" tells of the displacement of families and memories as "trucks whine through our families / places of conception" and "governments raze / half the corners we have known" (Bruchac 265). "Franklin Avenue Bridge" tells us "the river is dying" from "poison rains" and "pollution" which "storms / frothing down the sewer" while "children of plastic flowers / gather under the bridge / retouching old photographs" (Niatum 57). "Museum Bound" shows "oral traditions" depicted like "nations out of time," juxtaposes "sacred visions" and "coin returns," and finally claims "we are museum bound" (Foss 320). Those familiar with the larger body of Vizenor's works will find any number of connections in these few phrases culled from Vizenor's poems. Note, for example, how many times he later writes of the "retouched photographs" of Edward Curtis and the rich critical discussions that he develops about tribal identity.<sup>5</sup> Note, too, the frequent statements he has made about the importance of "interior landscapes" and the necessity to attach to something other than the physical, which might be destroyed beyond all recognition.<sup>6</sup>

In a career already spanning over thirty years, it is surprising to find such close continuity between early and later works. Perhaps most significant among the continuities Vizenor's work has maintained from his early haiku and poetry to his later fiction and other prose works, is the sense of balance between the tragic conditions and the determined survival of tribal people, between the despair of genocide, murder, suicide, and natural destruction, and the hope of trickster humor, tribal stories, memory, dreams, and change. Although it will take many other forms in his work, the notion of survival which finds expression here in his poetry still aligns neatly with Vizenor's philosophical vision. The possibility of survival he claims in such poems as "Anishinabe Grandmothers," where he acknowledges both the pain and the transformation of the pain: "the scars of reservation life / turning

under with age” (Rosen 44-45). But the balance of survival, he warns, only comes with recognition of and the aftertaste of the evil, the past, the pain, as he shows in the powerful last image from “North to Milwaukee”: “the phlegm of last rites / stains the sleeves of the survivors” (Rosen 42). Still, in accepting their reality, Vizenor believes his new mixedbloods go forward “tasting the rain / singing / the world will change” (“Anishinabe Grandmothers,” Rosen 45). These themes of change and tribal survival form and reform like active molecules in ever new configurations throughout Vizenor’s many published works continuing the balancing act that is survival. Indeed, the trickster mixedblood survivor becomes one of the most recognizable characters in Vizenor’s fiction even as his environs change from reservation to urban America, from America to as far afield as China. The specifics of survival change as well, but the fundamental motion originates within the pendulum of Vizenor’s poetry.

Throughout Vizenor’s works, poetic voices waver, transforming, finding balance between the word warrior ironist and the delicate painter of word pictures. Very early poems like those found in the 1971 *An American Indian Anthology* give us a glimpse of the apprentice poet. Stylized and filled with highly inflected language, they project the most romantic voice a reader will likely find in Vizenor. “The Moon Upon a Face Again,” for example, pleads “Caste not these Indians; / Potawatomi, Ottawa, Seneca, / From their Northern lands; / Their dreams to purge the winds,” and pictures the Native peoples “Now in columns on their knees, / Restless on the polished oak” (47). That early voice matures quickly and develops the range of its expression, achieving the beautiful subtlety of a haiku like this one from *Matsushima*:

plum blossoms  
burst in a sudden storm  
faces in a pool (unpaged)

Ultimately, the satirical voice of poems like “Thumbing Old Magazines” where Vizenor exposes unflattering images of “soft white money men / mothered from private schools” joins the gentle voice of “Unhappy Diary Days” where Vizenor, while depicting the surrender to suicide of a woman with terminal illness, manages to evoke both the beauty and fragility of life through simple descriptions like these: “shadows falling / plum colors of the sun / beneath her eyes” (Rosen 36-37, 32-33). Taken together the many approaches and verbal tones combine to create complex reverberations. Likewise, over the years Vizenor’s poetic vision has transformed itself, singing itself into the prose of his novels, stories and essays, but always retaining the echoes of each “interior dancer” and its poetic origin.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Curiously, just as Vizenor identifies the four “interior dancers” of his haiku, Lucien Stryk has noted how haiku poetry in the Zen tradition has four dominant moods: “sabi (isolation), wabi (poverty), aware (impermanence), or yugen (mystery)” (Porterfield 125).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Patricia Haseltine, “The Voices of Gerald Vizenor: Survival Through Transformation” (*American Indian Quarterly* 9.1 [Winter 1985]: 31-47).

<sup>3</sup>I discuss Vizenor’s haiku and *haibun* more extensively in *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* and in “The Multiple Traditions of Gerald Vizenor’s Haiku Poetry.”

<sup>4</sup>Vizenor has traced his descent from Keeshkemun, one of the eighteenth-century leaders of the Anishinaabe crane clan.

<sup>5</sup>For an example of Vizenor’s discussion of Edward Curtis’s work, see “Socioacupuncture: Mythic Reversals and the Striptease in Four Scenes” in *Crossbloods*. For more discussion of tribal identity, see *Manifest Manners*.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Vizenor’s comments on this subject in “Follow the Trickroutes, An Interview” in Joseph Bruchac’s *Survival This Way*.

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# *The Ceded Landscape of Gerald Vizenor's Fiction*

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Chris LaLonde

## I

Kimberly Blaeser's 1994 volume of poems, *Trailing You*, is framed by statements announcing both an awareness of boundaries and the effort to cross them. In her "Preface" Blaeser writes, "My work is filled with the voices of other people. It crosses boundaries of time and space, of ways of knowing, of what it means to be human." The biographical sketch following the final poem ends by quoting Blaeser: "In both my creative and scholarly work I hope to explore the way writing can cross the boundaries of print, seeking not to report but to engender life, seeking to understand and enact the ways of survival." Similarly, Gerald Vizenor, ever playful, articulates the impulse to cross boundaries in "Crows Written on the Poplars: Autocritical Autobiographies." In the essay's second sentence Vizenor declares, "The first and third personas are me" (101); in doing so he transgresses a convention of autobiography and blurs generic boundaries. With the next sentence he acknowledges the importance of autobiography in the effort to cross boundaries: "Gerald Vizenor believes that autobiographies are imaginative histories; a remembrance past the barriers; wild pastimes over the pronouns" (101). Like fellow crossblood Anishinaabe Blaeser, Vizenor sees writing, and not just autobiographical writing, as, potentially at least, an instrument for survival. Later in the piece he writes, "He understands the instincts of the survival hunter, enough to mimic them, but the compassion he expresses for the lives of animals arises from imagination and literature. . . . His survival is mythic, an imaginative transition, an intellectual

predation, deconstructed now in masks and metaphors at the water holes in autobiographies” (105) and in other forms of imaginative writing. Vizenor continues the provocative natural imagery in *The Trickster of Liberty* (1988), published the year after “Crows Written on the Poplars,” by referring to the “interior landscape” of the text “behind what [the] discourse says” (*Trickster* xi). The writer, in Vizenor’s words, “cedes the landscape to the reader and then dies” (*Trickster* xi). What is ceded, however, and how? And why? Finally, what is the relationship between the answers to those questions and the desire and need to cross boundaries?

Placing Vizenor’s work in dialogue with that of Wolfgang Iser offers one way to answer those questions. Iser’s reader-response theories have had a discernible impact on Native American literary studies. One need only look at the volume of essays entitled *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, edited by Vizenor, to see that Iser’s reader-response theories have played a vital role in recent criticism of Native American literature. Vizenor offers three epigrams to the volume: one each from Native American authors Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday, and one from Wolfgang Iser. Two of the essays in *Narrative Chance*, James Ruppert’s and Kimberly Blaeser’s, use Iser’s thinking on the dynamic nature of the literary text and the role of the reader in the construction of meaning to explicate, respectively, D’Arcy McNickle’s *The Surrounded* and Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Elsewhere, Blaeser turns to Iser’s reader-response theories when discussing Vizenor’s effort to write in the oral tradition.

Iser’s more recent work has received less attention by scholars of Native American literature, however; the work, published in several essays and two books, is a reorientation from the role of the reader and to the role of the author. As the titles of the two books indicate, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* and *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*, Iser attempts to formulate a theory that is a collaboration of literary and anthropological thought. It is worth noting that in both his non-fiction and his fiction Vizenor has charged, correctly I think, anthropologists with inventing culture and perpetuating “terminal creeds” at the expense of Native American identity and reality. Explicitly echoing Roy Wagner, Vizenor writes that “anthropologists and historians invent tribal cultures” and thus effect “a material and linguistic colonization of tribal families” (*Chippewa* 27). In *The Trickster of Liberty* Ginseng Browne declares in court that Walter Hoffman, who reported on the Anishinaabe Midewiwin Society, “invented Indians. He was scared. . . . He’s your authority not ours, we practice with ease what he envied and tried to own” (*Trickster* 147). Nevertheless, a careful exploration of the

relationships between Iser's theories on fictionalizing and literary anthropology, the anthropological concept of liminality that Iser neglects, and Vizenor's imaginative writing can help us better understand and articulate how Native literary texts negotiate boundaries, bring to light the terminal creeds perpetuated by the dominant culture, articulate survival, contribute to the healing process, and instigate change.

Iser defines fictionalizing as an act that "converts the reality reproduced into a sign, [while] simultaneously casting the imaginary as a form" (*Fictive* 2). Fictionalizing, that is, "leads to the determinacy of something [the imaginary] that by nature must be indeterminate" (*Fictive* 14). Its key feature is transgression, or what Iser terms boundary-crossing or overstepping. In fictions, be they philosophical, scientific, literary, religious, or what have you, "reality is made to point to a 'reality' beyond itself, while the imaginary is lured into form. In each case there is a crossing of boundaries: the determinacy of reality is exceeded at the same time that the diffuseness of the imaginary is controlled and called into form" (*Fictive* 3). Iser makes clear that "In literary fictions, existing worlds are overstepped, and although they are individually still recognizable, they are set in a context that defamiliarizes them" ("Fictionalizing" 939); thus, "literary fictions incorporate an identifiable reality, subjected to an unforeseeable refashioning" ("Fictionalizing" 939). That refashioning, available to the writer because of fiction's dual nature as what is and what is not, is made possible by acts of selection and combination.

Selection can be characterized as extratextual boundary crossing. The word refers to the process of divorcing an element from the system to which it belongs; in so doing the given order of the system—be it historical, cultural, social, or literary—is transgressed. The act of selection "deconstructs" the given order and turns the selected element and the system from which it comes into objects of observation. Selection, that is, throws elements and systems into relief in what is for Iser a violent act: "The whole process brings to the fore the intentional object of the text, whose reality comes about through the loss of reality suffered by those empirical elements that have been torn away from their original function by being transposed into the text" (*Fictive* 6).

The perspective the reader gains on the extratextual realities transposed into the text is enriched by a further act of transgression. Those selected elements or objects cannot be totally divorced from their extratextual systems, because "while the chosen elements initially spotlight a field of reference, [thus] opening it up for perception, they also permit the perception of all those elements that the selection has excluded" (*Fictive* 5). The reader cannot help but see the latter as a kind of background off of which the former plays. The extratextual systems, then, are present in their absence, as it

were, and the angle from which the selected elements are perceived is a result of both presence and absence.

Selection delineates referential fields, transgresses boundaries in the very process of delineation, and directs the reader's gaze to the new relations it inscribes. Its violence "encapsulates extratextual realities into the text, turns the elements chosen into contexts for each other, and sets them up for observation against those elements it has excluded, thus bringing about a two-way process of mutual review: the present is viewed through what is absent, the absent through what is present" (*Fictive* 6). Iser holds that the process makes selection a manifestation of intentionality. Given the connotations of that term in contemporary literary theory and criticism, it is small wonder that Iser takes pains to define precisely what he means: "If an act of selection were governed by a set of rules given prior to the act, then the act itself would not transgress existing boundaries but would simply be one form of actualizing a possibility within the framework of a prevailing convention" (*Fictive* 5). Because it is not so governed, however, the text's intentionality is revealed "in the way it breaks down and distances itself from those systems" (*Fictive* 6) it has selected and reproduced as signs.

While selection brings about relations between extratextual systems and those elements from them selected by the author, combination produces intratextual relations at the lexical and semantic levels. As is the case with selection, combination produces these relations by crossing boundaries: "Combination transgresses the semantic enclosures established by the text, ranging from the derestriction of lexical meanings to the buildup of the event through the hero's infringement of strictly enforced borderlines" (*Fictive* 19). Iser offers Joyce's creation of the word "benefiction" as an example of combination at the lexical level. "Benefiction" throws into relation benefaction, benediction, and fiction, and the traditional lexical meanings of those words fades out as a new lexical meaning is produced from the foreground-background relationship of benefiction in its fictional context and the words which were combined to produce it. Similarly, the combination of specific semantic structures in the text, themselves the products of the boundary crossing that is selection, creates "intratextual fields of reference" (*Fictive* 9) which are then transgressed by characters and readers. In this case, Iser takes for his brief example the lyrical self in order to indicate that the boundary crossing essential to combination is relevant for non-narrative as well as narrative literature. "Like the hero of the novel," he argues, "the lyrical self can emerge only by breaking out of and thereby moving beyond the semantic topography established in the poem" (*Fictive* 10). Thus, "Combination works on convention-governed functions of denotation and representation, whose reduction to latency permits new relations as otherness" (*Fictive* 233).

The importance of determining the lexical level of the fictional text by means of the fictionalizing act of combination is necessitated by the position Iser holds regarding the relationship between language and fiction. Explicitly following Bentham, Iser holds that language is essential to fictions because the former enables the latter to take on the appearance of reality. Bentham defines a “fictitious entity” as “an object, the existence of which is feigned by the imagination—feigned for the purpose of discourse—and which, when so formed, is spoken of as a real one” (qtd. in *Fictive* 118). Language, then, because of its own inherently feigned relationship between signifier and signified, enables the “relating process” characteristic of combination to occur; fiction “borrows the quality of reality from language” (“Feigning” 214) in order to derestrict the real through both combination and selection.

Iser stresses that the acts of selection and combination are not transcendent. Instead, they produce a “double-voiced discourse” through “various clusters—whether they be words with outstripped meanings or semantic enclosures broken up by characters” (*Prospecting* 271) that throw into relief intra- and extratextual systems of reference via intentionality and relatedness (*Fictive* 20). Neither the acts of fictionalizing nor the fictions themselves discard the “real world,” much less transcend it; rather, the acts enable us to see the real world.

## II

Iser’s theory of fictionalizing offers us a critical vocabulary with which to articulate how contemporary Native American authors cross boundaries in and with their work. At the same time, contemporary Native American writing interrogates and illuminates Iser’s theory. Vizenor, in particular, has stressed his fictionalizing acts of selection and combination in various interviews. In *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* he says, “I choose words intentionally because they have established multiple symbolic meanings, and sometimes I put them in a place so that they’re in contradiction, so that you can read it several ways . . . and there’s contention or agreement” (175). More recently, Vizenor acknowledges his delight in inventing words through combination and his interest in language games in order to highlight contradiction and give “meaning a chance to shift” (“Mythic Rage and Laughter” 90).

Consider the figure of Professor Terret Pan-Anna in Vizenor’s *The Trickster of Liberty*. Selection and combination come together in the figure and are highlighted as boundary-crossing acts. Pan-Anna, chairman of the Native American Indian Mixedblood Studies Department at the University of California-Berkeley, hires Tulip Browne, mixedblood private investigator and one of the heirs to the wild baronage of Patronia on the White Earth

Reservation, to investigate an incident of “witchcraft” and a stolen computer. In a text where names and naming are of paramount importance Vizenor accentuates Pan-Anna’s name and nickname in order to draw our attention to them. Indeed, even before Pan-Anna’s strange name appears to arouse the reader’s curiosity one is confronted by his nickname, Terrocious, in the chapter’s title. Then, after having to announce first his full name and shortly thereafter his academic title, name, and position, Pan-Anna tells Tulip Browne “you can call me Terrocious” (*Trickster* 70). She immediately repeats the name as a question, implicitly asking for an explanation of its origin and meaning, but Pan-Anna does not accede to her request. Far more than a breakdown in communication in a conversation marked by fits and starts, the unanswered question points to the importance of naming in the chapter, creates an expectation for both Tulip Browne and the reader, and enacts the deconstructive move of both differing and deferring that is characteristic of Vizenor’s artistic enterprise.

Our expectations are met later in the chapter when, after getting the facts of the case and dickering over her fee, Tulip asks Pan-Anna to tell her about his names. The nickname Terrocious was “a short sentence in public school” given to Pan-Anna by an angry high school principal who once “combined the words terrible and atrocious when he cursed me out” (*Trickster* 73-74). Pan-Anna, meanwhile, was the name given by then Vice President Theodore Roosevelt to the first Native American child born at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition. Terret’s “grandfather was so impressed with that exposition name that he adopted it” (*Trickster* 75) as the family surname. Together, the emphasis on the act of naming, the names themselves, and the way in which the names’ meanings and origins are revealed constitute a complex constellation of boundary crossing.

Tulip Browne’s interest in Pan-Anna’s names is fitting given the importance of names and naming to the Anishinaabe. Vizenor highlights that importance in the title of his 1984 collection of narrative histories, *The People Named the Chippewa*. Traditionally, an Anishinaabe would have six different types of names, ranging from nicknames to sacred dream names that were not to be revealed to strangers. One could have more than one nickname, and “with each . . . there were stories to be told” (*Chippewa* 13). Following contact with Euramericans, one would also have translations of the nicknames into English, mispronounced English names of Anishinaabe words, and the first and last names given to tribal children by officials at Federal and missionary boarding schools. Naming, then, is the extratextual reality from which elements are selected and transported into the text. The particular elements selected in this case are the tradition of nicknames, the names given to Natives by Euramericans, the stories told about them, and their humorous import.

The high school principal's act of naming Terret Pan-Anna Terrocious voices the anxieties the majority culture feels about its professed superiority and the need to subjugate the other, in this case the Native American. Here, too, selection and combination are highlighted. Terrocious arises when the boundaries of the selected words terrible and atrocious are crossed. At the same time, the meanings of those words serve as a background that illuminates the neologism and the anger of the official creating it. The Latin root of terrible means "to frighten"; that of atrocious, "dark-looking." Neither word alone will serve to communicate both the administrator's anger and racially-motivated fear, so the two are combined to create a neologism that makes clear precisely how he sees Pan-Anna. In light of this fear of the Native and anger toward him for being present and serving to remind him of the fear, the principal turns to language to dress the youngster down and Vizenor turns to combination to reveal the racist roots of that discourse.

Selection and combination serve to indicate why humor is necessary. In selecting Pan-Anna from the extratextual reality that was the 1901 Pan-American Exposition, for instance, Vizenor highlights the dominant Euramerican desire to name and identify the Native American, beginning—of course—with the word "Indian," and thereby attain and maintain authority and control. Indeed, Roosevelt's naming of the child is a parody of the Anishinaabe tradition of having a person, selected by the parents, give the newborn its sacred name. That name, not to be revealed to strangers, is not so important as are the dream from which it came and "the transmission to the child of the benefit which he or she derived from that dream" (Densmore 53). Pan-Anna comes from Roosevelt's and America's dream of progress, a dream that shaped and colored the 1901 Fair. In the words of Robert Rydell, "Through the Pan-American Exposition, America's ruling elites initiated Americans into the twentieth century with a utopian fantasy about peace and progress" (127). That fantasy rested upon imperialism, a racial hierarchy justified by a perversion of Darwinian theory, and the idea of Anglo-Saxon superiority. Thus, in the words of the Buffalo *Enquirer*, "In accordance with the general color scheme, which placed the harsh, bright colors at the southern end of the grounds and in the lower parts of the buildings, red will predominate near the base, gradually merging toward the top with a pale yellow and then to bright ivory" (qtd. in Rydell 136-37). The benefit derived from the dream of progress, of course, is that it sanctions white superiority and non-white subjugation, both of which are graphically evident in Roosevelt's act of naming and highlighted by Vizenor's incorporation of the act in *The Trickster of Liberty*.

Theodore Roosevelt's act of naming the first born Pan-Anna has been conceived as little more than an historical footnote to the 1901 Buffalo Expo, a barely remembered and little known act that *The Trickster of Liberty*



places in juxtaposition to the most widely remembered event of the Pan-American Exposition: the shooting of President William McKinley by anarchist Leon Czolgosz. In response to Tulip Browne's query, Pan-Anna says that his grandfather did not consider taking Czolgosz as the family surname. The possibility is offered, then, only to be denied. That denial suggests that Czolgosz' method for instigating change and bringing about liberation is inadequate. In fact, while the assassination "exposed the ethnic and class rifts in American society," it also led to the arrests of suspected anarchists and socialists, a clamor for immigration restrictions to be placed on undesirable ethnic groups, and a reiteration of the importance of the Pan-American Exposition's narrative of Progress (Rydell 152). What is more, Rydell points out that McKinley's death "increased the stature of the exposition as a visible reminder of cultural and political continuity in a society wrenched by disturbing signs of class conflict" (153).

If, on the metafictional level, *The Trickster of Liberty* indicates that the Native American writer would be unwise to turn to the figure of Leon Czolgosz as a model for how to bring about change and liberation, selection and combination in the form of the name Terret Pan-Anna indicate the rhetorical direction in which Vizenor, at least, turns. "Pan-Anna," as Vizenor discloses, is produced by Roosevelt's acts of selection and combination. Standing alone, the act of naming the Native American child is analogous to Vizenor's fictionalizing acts that produce his literary texts. "Pan-Anna" does not stand alone, however; it is preceded by Terret, a word no less unusual. A terret is the metal ring on a harness or collar through which reins pass or a leash attaches. It is essential for control. It comes from the Old French word meaning "to turn." In turning away from Czolgosz, Vizenor does not turn to Roosevelt and the narrative of mastery and racist authority latent in his act of naming: Pan-Anna makes clear that his grandfather did "not even [consider] the vice president" (75) for the family surname. Rather, Vizenor turns to the fictionalizing process nicely metaphorized in Roosevelt's act in order that he might craft fictions that articulate pain and survival and offer writer and reader an avenue to liberation and change.

Immediately prior to the phone call from Terret Pan-Anna, Tulip Browne has a chance encounter with a street person who offers as his alias the name Ronin Bloom. The two share personal stories, hesitantly and guardedly at first, over a meal. A portion of their conversation nicely articulates both the nature of fictions and the role Vizenor plays as a writer:

"No woman ever said that to me before," he mumbled and covered his knee. "You got nice legs too. Do you live in the hills or something?"

"Yes, with a mongrel."

“What’s his name?”

“White Lies.”

“Shit, is that a real name?”

“Reservation name.”

“You heard about crazy papers?”

“No, but you said something about that back at the Krakow on the Vistula,” she said. “Should I have crazy papers?”

“Definitely. With a dog named White Lies, you definitely need your own crazy papers,” he said and laughed. (66)

Here, too, the passage turns on a name, White Lies, and Ronin’s response to it. As was the case with Terret Pan-Anna, White Lies reveals more than one might see at first glance. The play is on the lies told to the Natives by whites, beginning with contact, continuing through the contemporary moment of Vizenor’s text, and right up to the present. The play of the reservation name is humorous, as Vizenor transforms the painful history and reality of the reservation into the name for the mongrel trickster in a move analogous to Luster Browne’s transformation of the “intended . . . colonial hoax” that was labeling an allotment of poor land a baronage into “a virtue in one generation” (5). In doing so, the pain is made light of, reformulated, transformed into something that can be laughed at so that one can better survive being an American Indian, on reservation or off, in the late twentieth century. Louise Erdrich, among others, has stressed that humor is “one of the most important parts of American Indian life and literature, and one thing that always hits us is just that Indian people really have a great sense of humor and when it is survival humor, you learn to laugh at things” (Coltelli 46).<sup>1</sup>

White Lies is also a playful turn to the nature of fictions themselves. From Plato onward, a line of philosophers and theorists have held that poets and fictionists lie, and the polite, acceptable, tolerated untruth that is the white lie is a succinct phrasing of that philosophical argument on the identity of the literary text. The lie that is fiction has been especially white for those outside the majority culture in general and versed in an oral tradition in particular. It is small wonder, then, that Ronin Bloom says “Shit” in response to “White Lies,” because Vizenor appropriates the white lie that is fiction to create what subjects of the dominant culture would consider shit: a remainder or excrement that it cannot take and does not want to see. Theirs is a misreading, however. In “Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games,” Vizenor juxtaposes the anthropologists’ stifling, deadening discourse with trickster’s and his liberating language games. Naanabozho, the traditional Anishinaabe trickster, is not a person but a sign, “shit in a comic holotrope” (203) that makes more than survival possible. Like Martin Luther in western theology, Vizenor argues, “The trickster does no less in literature to *heal and balance the world*; Barnouw, Dundas and

other theorists [of trickster] burdened with coprophilia would have done better to construe shit as a universal comic sign than to bind the literal malodor in social science monologues” (203, emphasis added). As Sergeant Alex Hobraiser tells the cultural anthropologist Eastman Shicer, “Shit” is the first word on her list of the lexicon of trickster discourse, and for both Hobraiser and Vizenor trickster discourse “is the way the world begins, not with an anthropologist but with mongrels and tricksters in a language game” (*Trickster* xviii). Vizenor, no less than Tulip Browne, needs his crazy papers, for with his fictions he does what Foucault argues is what makes one insane in the eyes of the community: he crosses the boundaries of the dominant bourgeois culture in order to reveal the lies upon which it is based.

### III

Bagese, a character in Vizenor’s novel *Dead Voices*, teaches the narrator of that novel what Vizenor would have us learn from his imaginative writing: stories matter. Stories help us see ourselves and our surroundings. Late in the text the narrator says that he “cried at the sight of my old friend who taught me *to see the real world in stories*” (142, emphasis added). The passage echoes the sentiment expressed early in the narrative regarding the stories told by Bagese’s father. Bagese learned well from her father and his stories, stories that “were shadows and sanctuaries in the winter, and the scenes he described were new tribal creations and relocations” (11). Within the sanctuary of story Bagese’s father, Bagese, the narrator, Vizenor, and the reader can participate in imaginative acts of transformation and re-creation that enable them to realize that “the real came from stories” (119) just as assuredly as we come to the real through them.<sup>2</sup>

Our ability to come to the real through stories is connected with the literary fiction’s disclosure of its subjunctivity. While the acts of selection and combination help constitute the process of fictionalizing that produces the literary text, their transgressions insure that the fiction is subjunctive in nature. For Iser, what distinguishes the literary text from all other subjunctive constructions is the former’s disclosure of its subjunctivity. Iser argues that literary fictions are profoundly conscious of their nature and that the self-disclosure of the literary text, accomplished by conventional signals that are shared by the author and audience, brings “an important feature of the fictional text to the fore: it turns the whole of the world organized in the text into an ‘as-if’ construction” (*Fictive* 13). Therefore, the reader is not to take that textual world as real, but to see it as a creation of what Iser labels the “enacted discourse” (*Fictive* 12) or “staged discourse” (*Prospecting* 272) produced by the fictionalizing act.

Disclosed as such, the fiction that is literary presents an unreal textual world that “embodies a radical alternative to the referential world” (*Fictive*

233) from which its elements have been selected and combined. That is, in the literary fiction the extratextual reality of the referential world is reproduced by boundary crossing in order that it might be transgressed. That transgression, in turn, is complicated by the “as-if” construction [that] discloses the fictionality of fiction, thus transgressing the represented world set up by the acts of selection and combination” (*Fictive* 19). Taken together, the various boundary crossings create a “reality represented in the text [that] is not meant to represent reality; it is a pointer to something that it is not, although its function is to make that something conceivable” (*Fictive* 13). Thus “literature becomes a panorama of what is possible, because it is not hedged in either by the limitations or by the considerations that determine the institutionalized organizations within which human life otherwise takes its course” (*Fictive* 297).

Iser argues that the ‘as if’ world of the literary text directs the reader’s attention and self-reflection to that which is withheld from us and the ways in which we either attempt to grasp it or are compelled to confront its elusive nature by the text’s disclosure and deconstruction of our attempts. Literary staging, like the act of fictionalizing that produces it, is marked by a duality, for it “allows us—at least in our fantasy—to lead an ecstatic life by stepping out of what we are caught up in, in order to open up for ourselves what we are otherwise barred from” (*Fictive* 303). Thus, the text produces an additional boundary crossing as “it stimulates attitudes toward an unreal world, the unfolding of which leads to the temporary displacement of the reader’s own reality” (*Fictive* 20).

Literary fictions play in the space between the real world and the imaginary. There, too, the reader plays with and is played by the text in order to arrive at a reading, or what Iser terms a supplement to the text game (*Fictive* 274). This resonates nicely with the position Vizenor articulates in *The Trickster of Liberty*, both in the prologue when he writes “The author cedes the landscape to the reader and then dies” (xi) and when Tulip Browne tells Terret Pan-Anna that for her report she “will describe several scenes and imagined events *as stories*, but the interpretation and resolution of the information will be yours, not mine” (72, emphasis added). Iser holds that literary fictions and anthropology share the same purpose: the staging of the inaccessible. The play-space created by acts of fictionalizing satisfies an anthropological need: “it allows us to conceive what is withheld from us” (*Prospecting* 261). Literary fictions, then, offer us a chance to extend ourselves, and hence to change, through their ability to bring absence into presence. Following Roland Barthes, Iser notes that, whether it is reading a readerly or a writerly text, “what the reader is given to do ‘is a form of work,’ and in doing it the reader is bound to be subject to transformation”

(*Fictive* 340).

Gerald Vizenor's fictions lead us, not toward Barthes and the pleasures of the text, but toward Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, and liminality in order that we might see how the texts bring about transformation and change. Doorways, windows, portals, and other thresholds abound in Vizenor's texts. In *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*, one of the first things we learn about Proude Cedarfair is that he "soars through stone windows" (5); this comment foreshadows the moment in the final chapter when Proude and Inawa Biwide follow their vision and "float through the corner window" (242) and into the fourth world. In between, Proude and his wife Rosina "climbed out through a window" (33) to leave their cabin and cedar circus home, meet characters who hail them from doorways and talk at thresholds (35, 99, 212) or otherwise situate themselves in what Vizenor is careful to label thresholds or portals (68, 75), and pass through various thresholds (see, for instance, 76, 166, 190, 234). The prevalence and importance of thresholds of one form or another in Vizenor's first novel are reiterated in his later fiction. For instance, Sergeant Alex Hobraiser situates herself near windows in the prologue of *The Trickster of Liberty* and shouts at Eastman Shicer from them in an attempt to make him hear (xii, xiii). Luster Browne "seceded at dawn beneath the bridal wreath" (9). China Browne met Wu Chou, gatekeeper of Zhou Enlai University, in his guard house, "moved to the door, where she stood in the frame" (40) during their conversation, and was "saluted" by Wu "from the wild threshold of the gatehouse" (42) upon her departure. Ginseng Browne and She Yan "huddled at the window" (142) while he tried to convince her to come with him and live deep in the woods of Patronia. Miniature dogs "bark in the windows" in *Dead Voices*, but "would never cross the threshold to menace bears" (36). The novel's narrator initially lurks at the window of Bagese's apartment, and Vizenor accentuates this for the reader by repeating the phrase "at the window" or its variant three times in a brief paragraph early in the narrative.

The thresholds are especially telling in Vizenor's fictions because the texts articulate the transformation of characters and are created to, among other things, transform the reader and his or her conceptions of the Native American. Such changes of state on the part of characters and reader are at the very least analogous to rites of passage, the cultural construct with which a community or society determines the identity of itself and its members. Arnold van Gennep, the pioneering rites-of-passage theorist, noted the importance of what he labelled portal rituals to rites of passage in many cultures. A door frame, in particular, was and is central to many rites, for it served and serves as "the boundary between two stages in life, so that in passing under it a person leaves" (60) one world and either enters another world or stays in the liminal stage of the rite for a time. During the liminal

stage the initiand is between states and out of time as typically conceived by the community. Liminality is fundamental to the rite of passage as formulated by van Gennep, for without it a loss of identity, an examination of identity, and either the confirmation of a new identity or a reconfiguration of the rite, the individual, and the community cannot occur.

Victor Turner's extension and reiteration of van Gennep's thinking resonates with the form and meaning of Vizenor's fictions. Turner stressed that the liminal stage of the ritual process that he called the social drama situated participants "betwixt and between." Time and again in his fiction Vizenor situates scenes and characters in precisely such liminal situations. Solstices, equinoxes, borders, dawns, and dusks figure prominently in his work. The author of the heirship chronicles "moved federal school time in our wild darkness on the winter solstice" (*Bearheart* viii); Prude Cedarfair and Inawa Biwide go through the vision window on the winter solstice. Ginseng Browne and She Yan go through the rite of marriage on the winter solstice (*Trickster* 143); Ginseng Browne insists that his "trial begin on the vernal equinox" (149). Stone Columbus anchors the *Santa Maria Casino*, the *Nina* restaurant, and the *Pinta* tax free market on the international border between the United States and Canada (*Heirs* 6). Slyboots Browne situates his "tribe boats" on the same border and an old trickster and tribal shaman inhabits a cabin on an island there as well (*Trickster* 126, 98).

The cultural cusp that is the staged discourse of the courtroom trial in *The Trickster of Liberty* is tacitly commented upon when Ginseng Browne demands that the proceedings begin in the natural liminality of the equinox. The white time of the federal school is juxtaposed to and supplemented by the wild natural time of the winter solstice in *Bearheart's* imagination and imaginative narrative. Similarly, the stories told to Bagese by her grandmother "were in the same natural time" (*Dead Voices* 12) as the shadows of the wounded birds who also listened to the stories while healing. Bagese thought her grandmother was a shaman, but eventually realizes that "she had taken me into her stories and trickster game" (12). It makes perfect sense that an alternative sense of time, stories, and trickster are conflated, here and elsewhere in Vizenor's fiction, because Vizenor understands that trickster celebrates chance and therefore possibility in and beyond narrative, and because the "mythic time and transformational space between tribal experiences and dreams" (*Chippewa* 3) in which trickster "wanders" is analogous to the imaginative space of and created by literary fictions.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, with "mythic time and transformational space" Vizenor nicely phrases the nature of liminality, and it is thanks to the liminal nature of Vizenor's trickster discourse that his stories can help the wounded heal, articulate survival, and instigate change. Here, too, Turner's thinking

resonates with and compliments Vizenor's, for Turner's observation of the subjunctive nature of the liminal stage of both rites of passage and social dramas yokes them with literary fictions and substantiates Vizenor's assertion that stories heal and transform.

Iser argues that aesthetic semblance is fundamental to the representation that is the literary text. He adds that aesthetic semblance "neither transcends a given reality nor mediates between idea and manifestation; it is an indication that the inaccessible can only be approached by being staged" (*Prospecting* 243). Similarly, Turner's social drama is a cross-cultural processual unit, agonistic in nature, designed to stage what is typically inaccessible. Social dramas have four phases: "breach, crisis, redress, and *either* reintegration *or* recognition of schism" ("Social Dramas" 145). Liminality is the key feature of the third phase, redress, and it is there that the crisis is played out and what is inaccessible to the culture in its everyday, codified existence, the possibilities being staged, is made manifest in order to be addressed.

Turner recognized the correspondence between the ritual process and linguistic moods. The preliminal and postliminal are analogous to the indicative; the liminal to the subjunctive ("Social Dramas" 159, 161). It is the subjunctivity of the liminal phase, its "as-if" nature, that enables "what is mundanely bound in sociocultural form" to be "unbound," interrogated, and "rebound" ("Social Dramas" 161). As a consequence, liminality, a time and space of indeterminacy or "subjunctive anti-structure" ("Social Dramas" 159), is "essentially ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling" (*Dramas* 174). More than the individual is unsettled, however; the rules and norms which govern behavior in the community are brought into the liminal phase and turned into objects of investigation. As such, the cultural values and meanings the community holds become subject to interpretation. Liminality is dangerous to the community because everything is subject to destabilization and potential revision or even destruction, and yet it is also vital to the community, for it is through liminality that both the individual and the community vigorously redefine themselves.

Liminality is the space and time of transition for individuals and cultures as they confront themselves. Vizenor makes clear that it is also the transformational time and space for healing: "The natural time to heal was at dusk when the trees, birds, and animals spread their enormous shadows" (*Trickster* 104). Iser, again, argues that the fictional is a "transitional object" ("Feigning" 225) characterized by the subjunctive, and to that extent it is akin to the liminal phase in sociocultural events. The liminality of Vizenor's literary fictions, highlighted throughout his texts, is also fundamental to his survival, which he terms "an imaginative transition" ("Crows" 105), for liminality enables individuals and cultures to, in Turner's words, "break the

cake of custom and enfranchise speculation” (*Forest* 106) by supplanting the indicative with the subjunctive for a time. Such a move enables “a transformative self-immolation of order as presently constituted [and] even sometimes a voluntary *sparagmos* or self-dismemberment of order” (“Social Dramas” 160) to occur.

Because there is the possibility of a “self-dismemberment of order,” moreover, the subjunctivity shared by the middle phase of the rite of passage, the redressive stage of the social drama, and the literary fiction suggests that liminality can aid in our understanding of how Vizenor’s fictions articulate and instigate change. The subjunctive nature of the literary text creates a liminal phase or space within which extratextual and intratextual elements are transformed and subject to acts of interpretation. Of perhaps greater importance, the liminality of Vizenor’s literary fictions, where speculation occurs and transformation is possible, enables the reader to change as well. For if within “the liminal periods of major rites de passage the ‘passengers’ and ‘crew’ are free, under ritual exigency, to contemplate for a while the mysteries that confront all men, the difficulties that peculiarly beset their own society, their personal problems, and the ways in which their own wisest predecessors have sought to order, explain, explain away, cloak, or mask . . . these mysteries and difficulties” (Turner, *Dramas* 242), then the liminality of the literary text and the reading act frees us to examine ourselves and society, and to interpret change in a fashion that, if successful, can help bring change in ourselves as well. It is no wonder then that Gerald Vizenor closes *Dead Voices* with the proclamation “We must go on” (144) in stories and in print. For such efforts on the part of writer and reader enable both to cross “over the threshold” and, like Vizenor’s narrator, experience “a transformation of voices” leading each reader to say, with the narrator, “nothing in my life has ever been the same since” (*Dead Voices* 16).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Humor, as Vizenor points out in *The People Named the Chippewa* by citing Frances Densmore’s work, is also often an integral element in nicknames (*Chippewa* 14). In particular, according to Densmore, “Adults sometimes bear the names that were given them because of some childish trait. . . . The element of humor is shown in the fact that a child who was a long time in teething received the name Without Teeth, and a child who was short in stature was named Stump, both names being carried by men who lived to an advanced age” (*Chippewa Customs* 53). Similarly, Terret Pan-Anna carries the nickname of his youth into adulthood, in no small measure because he “made the mistake of telling [the story of the name] at a faculty



party and the name stuck, as you might have imagined" (*Trickster* 74).

<sup>2</sup>Chaine Doumet makes a similar point in *The Heirs of Columbus* when he testifies that "some tribal people would say that the real world exists and is remembered nowhere else but in stories" (75).

<sup>3</sup>For Vizenor on trickster discourse see, for instance, "Trickster Discourse" in *Narrative Chance*. Also see Kimberly Blaeser, "Native Literature."

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## ***Blue Smoke and Mirrors: Griever's Buddhist Heart***

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Linda Lizut Helstern

In China, liberation is an old, old story. If the Communists divided Chinese history into two parts, “before liberation” and “since liberation,” the concept of liberation came to China with the first Buddhist scripture some 1700 years ago. The irony of the contemporary Chinese language game did not escape Gerald Vizenor, a veteran journalist and longtime student of Asian culture with a special interest in Zen and five books of haiku to his credit. He responded with a language game of his own, a novel in which the ultimate political liberation is spiritual liberation, or “trickster liberation,” to borrow Vizenor’s own phrase.

Written after an extended teaching visit to China in 1983, *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* captures with biting satire the historical moment following the restoration of diplomatic relations between China and the United States after a hiatus of some 30 years. Vizenor is, of course, a mixedblood member of the Minnesota Chippewa, and his choice of protagonist—a mixedblood trickster-teacher from the White Earth Reservation—underscores the parallels that can be drawn between Native Americans and the Chinese in their historic relationships with the Western imperial powers, including the forced cession of land, the missionaries’ role in introducing Western culture, a legacy of racism, and the brutal suppression of a religious and artistic heritage spanning thousands of years.

Vizenor witnessed firsthand China’s efforts to recover from its decade of Cultural Revolution, when the watchword in Chinese arts circles, according to Colin Mackerras, had become *hui fu*—*restore* (*Performing Arts* 204). It is perhaps the ultimate cross-cultural irony that Native American Indian writers like Momaday, Welch, Silko, and Vizenor himself had so recently begun to achieve recognition for their efforts to re-member their

own religious and artistic heritage. In *Griever*, the outrageous and creative Trickster spirit prevails: as the members reassemble to form a body, the reader may find some minor abnormalities, like a finger turned upside down. Even as Vizenor wields a double-edged sword against authoritarian tyrannies and the excesses of capitalism, the heart of *Griever* is an attempt to convey the essence of the Chippewa, or *anishinaabe*, and Chinese cultural legacies to a reading public equally unfamiliar with both—to tell traditional stories in ways that would demonstrate their cultural meaning and import, their underlying spiritual dimension.

Vizenor's protagonist, the trickster-teacher Griever de Hocus, can be simultaneously identified with the most popular heroes of the most popular literary forms of the *anishinaabe* and the Chinese: *naanabozho*, the mythological Trickster, and Sun Wu-k'ung, the trickster monkey of Chinese opera, the Chinese analog of Native American storytelling. The Monkey King attained buddhahood and literary immortality in a novel entitled *The Journey to the West* published in 1592, a fictional account of the travels and tribulations of a real seventh-century monk sent to India to bring back Buddhist scriptures. In the novel, these provide the key to the salvation of the orphaned spirits in the underworld: according to the compassionate Kuan-yin, only the Great Vehicle Laws of the Buddha can ensure the efficacy of the T'ang Emperor's Grand Mass of Land and Water, and her compassion ultimately enables the scripture pilgrim to complete his quest. Liberation from the round of birth, suffering and death—the achievement of nirvana by all beings—is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. Its saints are the compassionate teachers, the bodhisattvas, who have chosen to forego the buddhahood they have earned until every being in all six realms of existence has also attained enlightenment. The monkey, the traditional Buddhist symbol for the active and irrepressible mind, is perhaps the most recognizable element of Buddhist allegory in the novel, which serves as an extended reminder that achieving enlightenment requires taming both “the monkey of the mind and the horse of the will” (*Journey* 59).

“The compassionate woodland trickster” is Gerald Vizenor's way of referring to the *anishinaabe* Trickster *naanabozho* (Vizenor, *People* 3). Indeed, when *naanabozho* is given dominion over the earth and, with the eyes of the owl and the light of the firefly, discovers it to be a realm of great darkness and terrible evil demonized by the gambler *gichi nita ataaged*, he takes personal responsibility for liberating the evil gambler's tortured victims, as Vizenor's retelling of the old stories in *Summer in the Spring* reminds us (127). Often Trickster's compassion is less straightforward. In story after story, he violates conventional moral notions. Largely because of this fact, Trickster stands as a liberator who frees us from a reality “conditioned by human expectations and perceptions” (Ballinger 35). Monkey's close kinship with the Native American Trickster is established in the opening chapters of *The Journey to the West*. Monkey's beginning is no less

miraculous than *naanabozho*'s. While *naanabozho* is fathered by the North Spirit who has come to his lover as the wind, Monkey is born from a stone nourished since the creation of the world "by the seeds of Heaven and Earth and by the essences of the sun and moon" (*Journey* 67). "*Exposed to the wind*" (67, my emphasis), the stone egg hatches a stone monkey.

Monkey is trouble from the very beginning, for the two beams of light which flash from his eyes, reaching "even the Palace of the Polestar," immediately disturb the Celestial Jade Emperor. His daring soon earns him the respect of his entire troop and the title *Handsome Monkey King* (68-72). It is neither food nor sex which motivates Monkey but a voracious appetite for immortality. Some "three to four hundred years" into his reign, the Monkey King recognizes that ultimately he will die and begins a quest which leads him to his first teacher, Master Subodhi. It is Master Subodhi who gives Monkey the religious name *Sun Wu-k'ung*, "Wake-to-Vacuity" (82). The auspicious name with its Buddhist resonance, pointing "to the emptiness, the vacuity and the unreality of all things and all physical phenomena," plants the seed of Monkey's ultimate enlightenment (38). A superb pupil, within a few years Wu-k'ung masters the Art of the Earthly Multitude, seventy-two shapeshifting transformations that will protect him from all calamity. After the Monkey King devours the largest and best of the Jade Emperor's immortal peaches (an incident which serves as the basis for the most famous scene in Chinese opera), the Buddhist Patriarch ultimately proves that despite his extraordinary powers the Monkey King is not invincible. Only the compassion of Kuan-yin frees him from his imprisonment beneath Five-Phases Mountain to become the scripture pilgrim's protector.

With the name *Griever*, a name with its own Buddhist resonance and linked with both "griever time" and "griever meditation," the Monkey King Gerald Vizenor creates in this revival might have leaped right off the Chinese opera stage, where Monkey attained his major fame with the mass audience of illiterate peasants (Vizenor, *Griever* 50). Until the Communist takeover, the opera was a staple of the major religious festivals held each summer at temples throughout China (Mackerras, *Theatre* 94). The early operas, like Native American stories, were the medium for ethical and spiritual teaching to adults and children alike. Colin Mackerras notes that even after the opera plots had devolved to pure entertainment competing against such favorite entertainments as stilt walkers and acrobats, the open air performances retained at least a vestige of their original religious nature: the first scene often dealt with some Buddhist or mythological theme (Mackerras, 96; Bredon and Mitrophanow 392-94). Vizenor sets his Chinese stage with an appropriate Buddhist prologue. Griever's first acts in China are acts which liberate sentient beings from bondage— first a caged nightingale and then the butcher's chickens and the rooster who becomes the emblem (simultaneously Buddhist and Western) of his outrageous trickster

sexuality. Enjoined not to take the life of any sentient being, a faithful Buddhist gains special merit by saving a sentient being from unnatural death. In *Seven Years in Tibet*, in a story that directly parallels Griever's, Heinrich Harrer describes dining with a Tibetan friend in a Lhasa restaurant. One of the day's offerings, a goose, wandered through while they were eating. Harrer's friend promptly bought the goose, took it home and loosed it in his garden where it lived happily for years (191).

In Griever's childhood memory of freeing the biology class frogs, Vizenor again calls attention to the similarity between Buddhist and Native American Indian beliefs in the sanctity of life. The White Earth trickster-teacher early understood his bodhisattva role—not that all beings, or even most, are willingly liberated. The nightingale, for example, “held to the crown, unmoved when the miniature gate opened” (33). It is only when a feather tickles Griever's nose and he sneezes that the scared bird falls out of the cage. Fear of liberation is an obstacle that some characters in the novel cannot overcome, even with Griever's help. China Browne, the news reporter from the White Earth Reservation who tracks the missing Griever, is trapped in the Wheel of Becoming. She “worries about bad blood, small insects near her ears, and those wild moments when she loses connections with time. She is worried that she could be suspended without a season, severed from the moment; these fears have delivered her to the whims of clowns and the vicarious adventures of tricksters” (21). While Griever flies, China is hobbled, fixated on bound feet. Even the felons Griever frees from the execution caravan (three rapists, a heroin dealer, a murderer, a prostitute, a robber, and an art historian “who exported stolen cultural relics”) are, by and large, too afraid to make a break for freedom. Only the rapists make any real attempt to flee. The heroin dealer and the murderer wander away half-heartedly, but the others never leave their hijacked truck (153-55). Griever's lover Hester Hua Dan is no less afraid. While Griever is prepared to celebrate the impending birth of their child and take Hester flying with him, she is worried about the judgment of society and her father's judgment in particular. She doesn't want to be seen with Griever, a foreigner, and she wants no part of his escape plan. She will die, drowned by her own dogmatic father—her worst fears realized.

Vizenor builds his plot on several other concepts linked directly to Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist practice. The first of these relates to the nature of reality as a mental construct, the second to the impermanence of form, and the third to the traditional Zen “question-and-answer” method of instruction, which has been tied to the study of semantics. Buddhist metaphysics posits that spatial and temporal “realities” are no more than constructs of mind. As the worthy scripture pilgrim tells a gathering of monks at the beginning of his journey, “When the mind is active . . . all kinds of *mara* come into existence; when the mind is extinguished, all kinds of *mara* will be extinguished” (*Journey* 283). Enlightenment means a

coming to terms with the ultimate paradox of the universe, the fullness of the void. The Heart Sutra (the *Prajna-Paramita-Hrdaya* Sutra), faithfully transcribed in *The Journey to the West* in the version translated by the historical scripture pilgrim Hsuan-tsang himself, states, “Form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form” (*Journey* 52; 512n9). For Gerald Vizenor, enlightenment is the lesson of *The Journey to the West*, and it comes specifically through Monkey, Griever’s prototype. In a review of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey*, he says, “Anthony C. Yu, in his translation of *The Journey to the West*, noted that the classical monkey teaches enlightenment, ‘not simply the illusory nature of experience’” (“Postmodern” 17). *Griever’s* ending perfectly captures the paradox of the Heart Sutra. In his Trickster form, Griever keeps on going. In Buddhist emptiness, the mind and all *mara* disappear.

If reality is a mental construct, the dream world and the waking world have equal validity. Mastery of the mind utterly dissolves the mind/body problem with the implication that form is chosen and can be altered at will. In keeping with the cross-cultural thrust of *Griever*, it is not surprising to find a close correspondence between Buddhism and the Native American world-view. Louis Owens states unequivocally that in “Native American cosmology, the dream world and the waking world . . . are one, without boundaries” (248). In the letter to China Browne that opens the novel, Griever tells his dream about an ancient Chinese shaman bear who wears “a small blue rabbit on a chain around her neck” (17). He senses a direct connection between this dream and his “being here, now in the present” (16). As the novel progresses, elements from the dream manifest themselves in waking reality—not only the rabbit pendant but the black opal ring, the old man with butterflies, the birchbark scroll and all its contents. Insistently real mosquitoes move in the opposite direction, into the dream world.

The materialization of Griever’s dream unfolds the mind/body relationship in its infinite Buddhist complexity. The black opal ring, which turns up on or in various hands again and again as Griever explores China, appears first in the dream as one element of a complex mural, an art object within an art object. At the end of the mural, Griever not only finds baskets of culturally relevant objects (bear bones, blue stones and birchbark manuscripts), he is permitted to choose one of the birchbark scrolls to take with him. Unfortunately, his dream-self falls asleep on the way “home,” and he leaves his scroll in the vegetable wagon. The wagon sans scroll appears on the street the next morning when Griever takes his first walk in China. The dream’s black opal ring and birchbark scrolls reappear later in the novel as objects stolen from the British Museum and repatriated to their country of origin by the Oklahoma Sinophile Battle Wilson (192). In classic Buddhist fashion, however, what goes around, comes around. Stolen once again, the ring comes into the possession of the art historian who deals in cultural objects. One scroll, inherited by Kangmei from Wilson, her real father,

accompanies her and Griever on their freedom flight. Vizenor's plot complications are entirely consistent with a traditional assumption grounding Chinese art, an assumption closely allied to American Indian thinking but fundamentally at odds with Western attitudes. As Simon Leys has observed,

. . . while Western artists applied their ingenuity to deceive the perceptions of the spectator, presenting him with skillful fictions, for the Chinese painter, the measure of success was determined not by his ability to fake reality but by his capacity to *summon* reality. The supreme quality of a painting did not depend on its illusionist power but on its efficient power; ultimately painting achieved an actual grasp over reality, exerting a kind of operative power. (21)

Leys cites two examples to illustrate his point. The first is the story of a horse from the imperial stables that developed a limp. As it happened, Sung Dynasty master Han Gan had just finished painting its portrait but had forgotten to paint one of the hooves. The second is the story of a waterfall painted by the legendary T'ang master Wu Daozi on a wall of the emperor's palace. When the emperor discovered that the noise of the cataract kept him from sleeping, he asked the painter to erase the painting.

It is Griever's own scroll that Wu Chou, the man with the golden butterflies, produces for China Browne. The form his art takes is no accident. While recognizably Chinese, the scroll, as Griever notes, is also traditional among the *anishinaabe*, who documented their *midewiwin* ceremonies on birchbark scrolls. If Griever's "pictures from wild histories" reveal to China traces of a life now vanished, the reader is privileged to see Griever in the process of creating his own reality. In Griever's drawings, past and future, life and death lose their reality. When the butcher kills the chickens, Griever resurrects them on paper and, more than that, sets them free: "he holds cold reason on a lunge line while he imagines the world. With colored pens he thinks backward, stops time like a shaman, and reverses intersections, interior landscapes" (34). Like his trickster predecessors—and the Buddha—Griever seeks to liberate cultures from what Louis Owens calls "spatial and temporal repressions" (241).

In a comic reversal of the old Buddhist theme, what Griever immediately gains from chicken liberation is an attachment, a rooster sidekick who becomes both his emblem and his alarm clock. Griever ironically names the cock *Matteo Ricci*. Associated with sexuality in both Eastern and Western cultures, the cock links Griever to life, death, time, and history. In Buddhist iconography, the cock of desire is one of the "Three Poisons" at the hub of the Wheel of Becoming (Campbell 400). Time and space remained, however, something of an illusion to the Chinese until the arrival of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci in 1582. Thoroughly versed in Chinese



language and civilization, Ricci used Western technical achievements to gain the respect of the Chinese bureaucrats. It was he who brought the first clock, the Western Wheel of Becoming, and the first map of the world to China ("Ricci"). If Griever protects cocks, he hates clocks. As Wu Chou tells China Browne, he "carried a holster to shoot time" (26). His singular weapon is his scroll: reality begins in the imagination. As Griever himself says, ". . . imagination is the real world, all the rest is bad television" (28). In the end, Griever's mistake (and it may be a fatal one) supplies the ultimate trickster ending. He stops to ask for directions, bringing reality to bear upon imaginative flight. As Griever admits in his last letter to China Browne, "The real joke is that people never ask directions over here, this is not a map place where people remember an abstract location. We are the map people, not them. We were lost and asked them to make a map in their heads to tell us where they were so we could find out where we were. They know where they are, but we are up in the air" (231).

Again and again throughout the novel, the boundaries between art and life, dream and waking, physical and mental reality are so blurred as to be indistinguishable. The mute child Yaba Gezi first appears in a dream in which Griever gives him a pencil and the child makes several drawings on "smooth concrete." The dream ends in a brilliant flash of sound and light as a telephone rings: a blue light bursts from the child's head through Griever, and the two become "each other," raising the receiver to "our ear." Griever finds himself awake, telephone in hand, and the voice on the other end reminds him that visitors to the guest house have to sign in. Although he has had no visitors, Griever finds the child's drawings—a prairie schooner, an island with swine, and a man holding bones—on his concrete balcony (57-62). He actually meets Yaba Gezi on Obo Island late in the novel. The prairie schooner, the man, and the bones take on a three-dimensional reality as well.

Yaba Gezi is one of four trickster-teachers Griever will meet in China. All have special abilities to mediate between states of reality. The first is Wu Chou, the warrior clown, who initiates Griever into his role as the Monkey King of the Chinese opera. The retired opera star bears a close resemblance to the elders responsible for conducting tribal rituals and for the religious training of younger men. When Wu Chou "was too old to tumble as an acrobat," we learn, "he studied the stories of tricksters and shamans in several countries around the world" (23). He ritualistically paints Griever's face, garbs him in one version of the traditional Monkey costume (a yellow opera coat and a biretta with two blue tassels), and cautions Griever on the language and behavior appropriate to the Immortal Monkey. Griever's second teacher is Shitou the stone shaman, who "breaks stones into laughter" with one hand. Through Shitou, Griever proudly acknowledges his

relationship “to the stone in his own tribal origin stories” (72). The stone, in fact, is *naanabozho*’s brother, one of three sons born of the meeting between his mother and her *manidoo* lover. *Naanabozho* ultimately kills the other two. Stone actually assists him by teaching *naanabozho* that stones will break with alternate applications of cold and heat (Barnouw 15-17). On Obo Island, Shitou offers Griever instruction in stone-breaking, telling him to dream that the stone is an egg with a bird inside waiting to be released. Ultimately, Shitou will break the hard news of his lover’s death to Griever. The Chinese origin of Shitou’s name, which literally means “stone-head,” sheds additional light on his role as Griever’s teacher (Watts 97). The historic Shih-tou was the leading master of a famous Zen center in the Heng Mountains during the eighth century, and it was he who developed the doctrine of the unity of the absolute and the relative and of “light” and “darkness” (Wood, “Shih-t’ou”).

The mute pigeon Yaba Gezi also offers Griever an important teaching on Obo Island. It is difficult to resist a pun in Vizenor’s work, and the pun on *gezi* suggests just how important this teaching is. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, *geshe* is a formal term of address for an eminent spiritual preceptor, higher in degree than a lama (Humphries). When Griever begins his emblematic drawing of Obo Island’s inhabitants, Yaba Gezi circles him, capturing reality in two mirrors which reflect each other and turn everything blue. Mind and mirror have longstanding associations in Zen. Indeed, in one of the most famous of all Zen stories, the Fifth Patriarch chose Hui-neng as his successor on the basis of a poem expressing his insight into the nature of mind and reality. The leading candidate Shen-hsui wrote the following poem:

Our body is the Boddhi-tree,  
And our mind the mirror bright.  
Carefully we wipe them hour by hour,  
And let no dust alight. (Wood, “Hui-neng”)

Hui-neng, ultimately selected as the Sixth Patriarch, found this to be inadequate and responded,

There is no Boddhi-tree,  
Nor stand of a mirror bright.  
Since all is void,  
Where can the dust alight? (Wood, “Hui-neng”)

Both masters made an enduring impact on the development of Zen, Shen-hsui as leader of the Northern School advocating gradual enlightenment and Hui-neng as leader of the Southern School advocating sudden enlightenment (Wood, “Hui-neng”). Remembering his first night’s dream, Griever begins to ask explicit questions aimed at getting to the bottom of several mysteries,

including the meaning of Yaba Gezi's mute speech. Kangmei has mastered the esoteric art of communicating with him. Speaking into the mirrors, which now reverse sound rather than light, she begins by stating the ultimate Buddhist reality, the ultimate answer to all questions: "Nothing." She translates Yaba Gezi's response from silence into sound, but until their bones are found on the night of the Marxmass Carnival, "Children in the pond" will have no meaning (174). Yaba Gezi demonstrates the simultaneous existence of form and emptiness: sound and silence, stone and light, the blue of nirvana and the blue of death. What this means is left for others to interpret.

Even for Griever, higher levels of learning must follow certain basics. These are the province of another trickster-teacher. Hua Lian can be identified by her name, which means "painted face," as a Chinese opera stock character of the supernatural type. Like Buddha's, her eyebrows are luminous. Her horsehair duster, the stock prop of gods, goddesses, spirits, nuns, and monks, found its original use in Buddhist ritual. Heinrich Harrer recalls the honor of being invited to the Potala to receive a New Year's blessing from the Dalai Lama himself. The first layman in the reception line, Harrer, like the monks ahead of him, felt the light touch of the Dalai Lama's hand on his head. He was somewhat surprised to discover that "a sort of silken mop" was used to bless the seemingly endless line of the faithful who followed (224-25). It should come then as no surprise that a "supernatural" like Hua Lian has the ability to mediate between Griever's dreams and the waking world. When Griever falls asleep on a park bench after a mysterious conversation with Hua Lian, it is she who wakes him, telling Griever that his finger, which was upside down in the dream, has turned (116-19). In the dream, as in their conversation, Hua Lian asks Griever "What is your *meng mingzi*?" She wants to know his dream name. The *anishnaabe* dream name, given at birth, is never revealed to strangers, and the White Earth trickster-teacher always deflects her question (Vizenor, *People* 13).

What Hua Lian really wants to know, she explains to Griever, is his temperament, his heart. A similar exchange based on a Chinese pun, *hsing/surname* and *hsing/temperament*, takes place between the Monkey King and his first teacher. All Master Subodhi wants to know is Monkey's last name. Monkey proceeds to explain his temperament. In Zen tradition dating from the seventh century, there is an historic precedent for both scenes. At their first meeting, the Buddhist Patriarch asked the monk Hung-jan (who would himself later become the Fifth Buddhist Patriarch) his name (*hsing*). Hung-jan replied that his nature (*hsing*) was no usual nature. The Patriarch missed the pun and restated the question, to which Hung-jan responded, "It's Buddha nature!" "You have no name then?" queried the Patriarch. "That's because it's an empty nature," came the response (Watts

90). While the entire story is accurately rendered in *The Journey to the West*, Vizenor's reversal captures the essence of its Zen spirit. Griever's exchange with Hua Lian becomes particularly ironic in the context of the Chinese theatre. An old superstition forbade traditional actors from ever speaking the word *meng/dream*, and so rather than saying he had dreamt (*huang-liang-meng*), an actor substituted the phrase *huang-liang-tzu*, alluding to the immortal Lu Tung-pin's famous Yellow Millet Dream. Lu Tung-pin apparently went to sleep just as a pot of millet was put on to cook. He dreamed that he became an emperor and lived out the rest of his life. When he awoke, he found that the pot of millet had not even begun to cook (Arlington 59). The actors, it seems, saw a serious potential for confusion in the unbounded unity of dream and reality, art and life. Indeed, two parallel couplets were written on the front of the stage at the end of every opera. The first simply stated, "Life is not a performance on the stage." The second warned the audience, "When the players make their exit, the tragic and the comic, the parting and the reunion, must instantly become a vanishing dream" (Bredon and Mitrophanow 156-59).

Hua Lian plays the role not only of Zen master but also of Native elder/master storyteller. While she might be expected to tell a trickster story, the story she tells to honor Griever's dead lover and the five children found with her in the pond is, in fact, a trickster transformation of a traditional Buddhist parable. In Hua Lian's story, a hungry shaman bear accepts offerings of food from otter and from raven. Rabbit, however, has no food to give the bear and so offers himself, leaping into the fire and earning the bear's praise. In commemoration of the sacrifice, the rabbit is transformed into the moon, henceforth known as Jade Rabbit. The original story, rewritten here by Vizenor to incorporate the most powerful American Indian healing spirit, gave the role of the bear to Buddha himself (Bredon and Mitrophanow 406-09). Vizenor's creative transformation of the story is totally in keeping with its Chinese cultural history. Throughout the Buddhist world, the moon is known as the "Hare-Marked." The Taoists made the story their own by creating the character of Jade Rabbit, who lives in the moon pounding the Pill of Immortality, otherwise known as the Elixir of Jade. By virtue of the lapis lazuli (read "blue jade") pendant that she wears, Hester becomes Jade Rabbit, who, as Hua Lian notes, has a companion similar to Griever. In the traditional story, he is a scholar condemned for some misdemeanor to spend eternity trying to chop down the sacred, self-healing cassia tree (Bredon and Mitrophanow 410). The story of Jade Rabbit and the Monkey King are ultimately linked through another creative transformation. In the opera *The Havoc of Heaven*, the Monkey King is sentenced to chop down the cassia tree as punishment for his theft of the peaches of immortality. Only when he accomplishes this impossible task

will he gain his freedom. This hybrid version is assuredly easier to stage than the punishment originally meted out to Monkey in *The Journey to the West*—imprisonment under Five-Phases Mountain.

*Griever's* episodic structure is itself a Buddhist statement of the nature of the physical world, which arises new each moment in thought. The world of the present moment has nothing to do with the moment just past or the moment that will arise. Each act of liberation *Griever* undertakes arises spontaneously from his essential nature. His character does not develop in the classic sense. *Griever* never learns anything that he doesn't already know. He only recognizes the truth with increased intensity. This is classic Zen. In the words of Alan Watts, "... one does not practice Zen to become a Buddha; one practices it because one is a Buddha from the beginning—and this 'original realization' is the starting point of Zen life" (Watts 154). In the term *trickster-teacher* Gerald Vizenor may, ironically, have coined the best of all possible descriptors for a Zen master, whose goal is to facilitate the discovery of the unnameable reality which cannot be "classified in limits and bounds." The unnameable is full of creative potential, like the fan which a wise master showed three students one day at tea. The first student opened it and fanned himself. The second student closed the fan and scratched his neck. The third opened it, put a piece of cake on it, and offered it to the master (Watts 130).

The exchange between the Buddhist Patriarch and the monk Hung-jan has all the characteristics of the typical "question-and-answer" method of Zen instruction (Watts 87). The patriarch's question is so uncharacteristically straightforward there is little wonder it elicits a "trick" response. The aim of the master's questioning, according to Watts,

is always to precipitate some type of sudden realization in the questioner's mind, or to test the depth of his insight. For this reason, such anecdotes cannot be "explained" without spoiling their effect. In some respects they are like jokes which do not produce their intended effect of laughter when the "punch line" requires further explanation. One must see their point immediately or not at all. (87)

A straightforward question will never capture the essence of reality, only its illusion. As Wu Chou makes *Griever* up for his role as the Monkey King, he cautions him that Monkey never asks questions. "The Monkey King," says Wu Chou, "has appetites, he devours the whole world, but he never lives on questions or silence." "Mind Monkey," *Griever* observes, "is a trickster" (140-41). *Griever* awakens from his dream in Hua Lian's presence and hands her the glass eye he has dreamed, one of the eyes her father buried at the beginning of the revolution.

Wit, the ability to use language tricks to open new realities, is the character trait which distinguishes the “good guys” from the “bad guys” in Vizenor’s cast of characters. Hester’s attraction to Griever grows as she follows him through the train, translating “fantastic episodes” from his “imagined existence” (91). When she doubts the sincerity of his feeling for her, Griever offers her his own version of Chinese proverbs in ideograms written on his palms. Hester soon flirts openly with a proverb of her own, one taken directly from *The Journey to the West*, and then dares to ask, “What do you get when you touch a mind monkey?” “Toilet paper” is his trick response, at once closing the scene they have played with the American teacher Colin Gloome and opening, with delightful nonsense, the new reality that exists between them. Egas Zhang, Hester’s father and the type of the crafty and evil government bureaucrat, is, like Gloome, utterly defeated by the thrust of Griever’s language. Zhang suspects Griever of substituting American marching music for “The East is Red” and comes to his door to confront him. Knowing the best defense is a good offense, Griever uses puns, rhymes, and figures of speech to maintain total control of the situation. He turns everything around, even the sex of John Philip Sousa, and finally dismisses Zhang, shutting his door to any further questions. In a scene worthy of the Marx brothers, Griever never tells a lie.

The word play takes a specifically Chinese turn when Griever meets Pigsie and his swine on Obo Island. Several pigs are marked with their names in ideograms, and Griever gets a lesson in elementary Chinese. Four names are based on the ideogram *ma*, meaning *horse*, and Griever can clearly see the linguistic relationships. He quickly observes that the fifth name is different. The explanation makes perfect sense in aural Chinese: the pig’s name is “Ma-o” Zedong (167). Even in his use of language Vizenor makes an important cultural statement. The pun, both verbal and visual, permeates Chinese culture. The name/nature pun on *hsien* is utterly characteristic, as Anthony C. Yu explains again and again in his editorial notes on *The Journey to the West*. It is finally through language itself that Gerald Vizenor conveys the essence of China, the essence of the Native American Indian Trickster, and the essence of reality, liberating us through laughter as our preconceptions vanish, like Griever, into thin air.

Griever cannot resist a final question as he and Kangmei soar above the water park: he still wants to know the secret of her scroll. She admits, finally, that it is just what his teasing words suggest—a sacred recipe, for blue chicken no less. No matter how sacred, this scroll offers only a pat formula which leaves nothing to the flight of imagination, and its unstated first step inevitably means killing a chicken. This is not Griever’s legacy. It is the antithesis of the message of the scroll that China Browne anxiously peruses. In the letter to China that closes the novel, Griever compares the

peacefulness of flying to brush strokes in an ink painting. Indeed, he acknowledges, “Those artists must have been flying in their heads, but not with the roar of an engine.” Like a master painter himself, Griever sees at last, he says, “what they must have seen to paint their pictures” (232). What traditionally invests ink paintings with their life is emptiness. By a technique known as *fei bai*, “flying white,” emptiness, or white space, can be rendered even in the individual brush stroke (Leys 30). With a little high-tech help, Griever has mastered the essential technique of making himself one with the object to be rendered. It is the ultimate tribute to art and life that Griever and Kangmei disappear into the landscape—a mastery of emptiness and form, an old Zen trick.

NOTE

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***Liberation and Identity:  
Bearing the Heart of The Heirship Chronicles***

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Andrew McClure

In James Welch's novel *The Death of Jim Loney*, the character of Myron Pretty Weasel notes a persistent problem in the way Indians are perceived. When telling why he left college and a basketball scholarship, Pretty Weasel explains to Jim Loney, "I'll tell you why I came back—because I couldn't stand those people down there. You know why. Because they put the pressure on me, all this Indian bullshit. You know what they called me in the newspaper? Super Chief. . . . Indian play basketball good, Indian friend of the white man" (101). Pretty Weasel's dismay surely comes from the stereotype of the stoic but friendly Indian—an insistence that "Indians" agree with a preconceived definition of what "Indianness" is supposed to signify.

Pretty Weasel's brief monologue exposes a complex web of both how Native Americans are perceived and how they perceive themselves. In most cases there seem to be three possibilities: The Indian as a wild savage in the manner of Injun Joe in *Tom Sawyer* (fortunately this view is increasingly less common); the romantic construction of the Indian as the Cooperesque, stoic but friendly "noble savage" that gives rise to stereotypes of people like Pretty Weasel—"Indian play basketball good, Indian friend of the white man"; or the Indian as victim. In each instance, the label—the sign—is static and one-dimensional, which greatly narrows an identity that is ultimately impossible to define.

In discussing "otherness," or any marginalized group, the initial temptation is to fall into a solely dichotomous way of thinking, or as Arnold Krupat puts it, a way of thinking that defines a particular ethnic experience

as a “victimist history” (20). I agree with Krupat in not denying that “the indigenous peoples of this continent, along with African Americans, women, and many other groups, have overwhelmingly been more sinned against than sinning” (21); relentlessly keeping this fact at the forefront of any study, however, leads to “dichotomized, binary, oppositional, or manichean reasoning” which is ultimately “inadequate to the actual complexities of cultural encounter in history” (20). In other words, manichean reasoning with respect to Native American identity inevitably leads to victimist history of the “genocidal Euramericans [against] the innocent and hapless Native Americans” (20). Pretty Weasel’s concern about the identity imposed on him springs not exclusively from the victimist approach as much as it does from the narrow, one-dimensional way of seeing Native Americans that causes people to call Indians “chief” or to think they must somehow conform to what predetermined definitions dictate an “Indian” should be.

In defining what he calls “ethnocriticism,” Krupat elaborates on the “oppositional” view and proposes a broader, dialogic perception of Native literature:

Ethnocriticism at home rejects all forms of manichean discourse whether of a traditional and neocolonial or of a revisionist, “victimist” kind. Thus, ethnocriticism . . . is concerned with differences rather than oppositions, and so seeks to replace oppositional with dialogical models . . . Ethnocritical discourse regards border and boundary crossings, with their openness to and recognition of the inevitability of interactive relations, as perhaps the best means to some broadly descriptive account of the way things “really” work in the material and historical world. Ethnocriticism thus wishes to develop and refine dialogic models whose claims to accuracy, systematicity, and knowledge would reside in their capacity. . . to take in more context. (26)

An approach such as Krupat’s that recognizes the dialogic nature of the Native American self and experience strikes me as not only the most interesting and least polemical approach to Native American literature but also the most circumspect; and it is the approach least likely to entrap the critic in one-dimensional signs associated with Indian identity because the concept of dialogism itself recognizes and emerges from the multi-voiced, dynamic nature of language and, in this case, of the Native identity.

Krupat’s method takes the dialogic model, which originates from M. M. Bakhtin’s theory of what he calls “novelistic discourse,” and applies that model to Native American fiction not just as an improved hermeneutical device but as the ideal method with which to begin to articulate the complexities of the Native American ethnic experience. Dialogism is in

direct opposition to the either/or, manichean position discussed above. A “victimist” approach, or any approach that uses as its center some sort of either/or binary opposition, does not or cannot recognize the full complexities of the subject, nor is it capable of transcending the narrow definition of “Indianness” which Welch recognizes through the words of Myron Pretty Weasel.

Ethnocriticism and dialogism are pertinent to Gerald Vizenor’s *Bearheart* because that novel deals with the question “What does Indian mean?” on many levels, and the manner in which Vizenor explores that question can be so disturbing and violent that one might easily misunderstand the novel or write it off as perverse and excessive with its unrelenting representations of torture, cannibalism, death, and general depravity. In the midst of all the horror in *Bearheart* there are constant references to the question, “What does Indian mean?” and a radical, violent resistance to preconceived, external definitions of Indianness. *Bearheart* is exemplary in the manner in which it resists and tears down one-dimensional definitions of Indian; instead, *Bearheart* shows that Native American identity is eclectic and multi-dimensional—something that changes shape and adapts to historical change, and as Vizenor would surely want us to believe, “Indian” is something one should be very careful in ever trying to define.

In the introductory essay to his recent anthology, *Native American Literature*, Vizenor writes: “The American Indian has come to mean *Indianness*, the conditions that indicate the once-despised tribes and, at the same time, the extreme notions of an exotic outsider; these conditions are advocated as *real* cultures in the world. The simulations of the outsider as the other subserve racial and cultural dominance” (1). Not only is “*Indianness*” a construction that “subserve[s] racial and cultural dominance,” the very word “Indian” is an invention

that does not come from any native language, and does not describe or contain any aspects of traditional tribal experience and literature. Used as a noun, Indian is a simulation of racialism, an undesirable separation of race in political and cultural interests of discovery and colonial settlement of new nations; the noun does not reveal the experiences of diverse native communities. (1)

Anthropologists, historians, literary critics, and others interested in Native Americans are the most likely to propagate invented Indianness. Indeed, there is a potentially wide gap in how academicians view “Indians” and how tribal people view and represent themselves in literature; in *The People Named the Chippewa*, Vizenor writes:

Traditional tribal people imagine their social patterns and

places on the earth, whereas anthropologists and historians invent tribal cultures and end mythic time. The differences between tribal imagination and social scientific invention are determined in world views: imagination is a state of being, a measure of personal courage; the invention of cultures is a material achievement through objective methodologies. To imagine the world is to be in the world; to invent the world with academic predictions is to separate human experiences from the world, a secular transcendence and denial of chance and mortalities. (27)

The key distinction lies in the assertion that “To imagine the world is to be in the world,” as opposed to inventing the “world with academic predictions” and not taking into account “human experiences.” Native writers “imagine” their “liberation” in the literary text, and that liberation is a liberation from invented identities (Vizenor, “Trickster Discourse” 194). After all, what does it mean to be “in the world,” to represent “human experience”? Obviously, the possibilities are broad, as are the examples of “imagining the world” in Native American literature. Whatever “human experience” and “be[ing] in the world” might mean for Native Americans, it should be a construct or a process that is “imagined,” and upset, deconstructed, and exposed in all of its possible nuances. Accomplishing this can be surprising and disturbing.

In an interview with *MELUS* in 1981, Vizenor states, “I recognize the responsibility in my own work to educate my readers, and I’ve set out to do that systematically . . .” (Bowers and Silet 43). On the issue of Indian identity, Vizenor targets the “invented Indian” (45):

we’re invented and we’re invented from traditional static standards and we are stuck in coins and words like artifacts. So we take up a belief and settle with it, stuck, static. Some upsetting is necessary. In other words, an imbalance is created, so, to seek a balance, energies must be used to upset it. (47)

The distinct difficulty with *Bearheart* is understanding that in this novel Vizenor directly attacks the “static” Indian “stuck in coins”—the Indian James Welch’s Pretty Weasel feels uncomfortable with; but not only is Vizenor attacking how whites perceive Indians, he also attacks the way in which Native Americans perceive themselves, and this aspect of the novel emerges at times in highly disturbing ways. After all, how can someone say Indians don’t know what they are? But the disturbance is central to his deconstruction of invented Indians: Vizenor is out to prove that many Native Americans have false or destructive “colonial” perceptions of what their own

“Indianness” means. Indeed, deconstructing invented Indianness is an intricate part of what Vizenor terms “survivance,” which is “the resistance of the tribes to colonial inventions and representations envisioned [in] the ironies of histories, narrative, discourse, and cultural diversities. The postindian mien is survivance over dominance” (*Manifest Manners* 167). Thus, Vizenor’s attack is, as he puts it, “upsetting,” but to the end that tribal people can better negotiate their way through the complexities of cultural contact and conflict and that Native American identity might transcend “colonial inventions.”

To arrive at a balanced reading of *Bearheart* one must recognize Vizenor’s use of satire and its relationship to what he terms “trickster discourse.” Not only does he use characters as tricksters, but he also constructs the narrative itself in such a way that *it* functions as trickster, to the end that he might “educate” his readers by “upsetting” our perspectives. In “Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games,” Vizenor writes, “In trickster narratives the listeners and readers imagine their liberation; the trickster is a sign and the world is ‘deconstructed’ in a discourse.” Through trickster discourse Vizenor wants to engage his audience in a “patent language game in a narrative discourse” (194). The trickster narrative upsets the reader’s imagination by tearing down, challenging, exposing, and essentially deconstructing previously held notions about meaning and the delusion that language is static, one-dimensional. Vizenor’s notion of trickster discourse, then, is largely a question of language. As Alan Velie explains,

However else one might categorize *Bearheart*, it is first and foremost a trickster novel. And whether in the tribal or modern world, trickster means different things to different people. To Vizenor trickster is first and foremost a sign in the semiotic sense, a sign in a language game, a comic holotope. This means that Vizenor conceives of trickster as a product of language, who must be seen in a linguistic context; trickster is not a reified social urge, fitting neatly into the model of a social scientist.” (“The Trickster Novel” 131).

Vizenor’s “language game” operates at several levels in *Bearheart*. He makes it clear that he is attacking language problems from the very outset by titling the novel-within-the-novel *The Heirship Chronicles: Proude Cedarfair and the Cultural Word Wars*. *Bearheart*, then, is just as much an account of “cultural word wars” as it is a story of the circus pilgrims’ quest to reach the fourth world. Within Vizenor’s larger attack on “terminal creeds” is a subtle game working around the free play of meaning in individual words and phrases. It begins in the novel’s frame story, where the young AIM activist encounters *Bearheart* in the siege of the BIA headquar-

ters. We already know from the title that the novel will have something to do with the concept of “heirship,” and Bearheart explains how heirship fits into his narrative:

*We dreamed about the omens and grave heirship stories we told on the future of the tribes at war with evil and words.*

*We are finished with the third world now, and we wait here in the darkness, less than one month from federal retirement. Our last words into the fourth world winter solstice. The heirship stories are hidden in a metal cabinet with other tribal documents. Bearheart at his words, but who would read our heirship documents now? (vii)*

If we assume that “heirship” is linked to “survivance,” meaning the process of preserving tribal stories, culture, property, and identity by transmitting them from generation to generation, then the significance of the “documents” (which make up the novel itself) and the concept of heirship are great, just as tribal stories are vital because they give meaning to Native cultures.

But the minute we think we realize the apparent seriousness of “heirship,” Vizenor deflates it to absurdity with a crude verbal pun. This occurs when the AIM activist asks Bearheart, “*What is hairship?*” (xii), and continues to say “*hairship*” instead of “heirship” throughout the scene. The silly sounding homonymic confusion has a significant relationship to the larger language game Vizenor plays in *Bearheart*; just as Vizenor critiques the idea of the “invented Indian,” here he targets the AIM activist who, while seeming to be in touch with a significant cause for Native Americans, really has no idea about the meaning of heirship. Or more precisely, the AIM activist has the wrong idea about it, and is really pursuing her activism in the name of invented, terminal creeds. Her delusion about heirship parallels her conception of “Indianness,” which is best illustrated through her plastic bear claws, suggesting that she has adopted an outward, “invented” Indian identity (Owens 231)—a static, destructive concept of the word, and Vizenor illustrates this shortcoming with the homonymic word play, which shows how near a seemingly vital word—“heirship”—is to complete absurdity.

To take the word play in the scene even further, from Bearheart’s narrative it becomes evident that “heirship” is drained of its original meaning through governmental bureaucracy and outright thievery. When the AIM activist asks Bearheart, “*Where are the hairships?*”, he replies, “*Our tribal heirdom no place now.*” He tells her that “*Hairdom*” is “*The white lies that would be our tribal inheritance*” (x). To answer her question, “*What is hairship?*”, Bearheart replies, “*The names of the tribal people . . . who would own the land if tribal land could be owned, and if those who had died owned the land. The government held our reservation land in trust so*

*the timber could be cut and minerals mined*" (xii). The government has taken away any possible meaning from the word; thus, tribal heirship ultimately becomes as absurd as the nonsensical *hairship*.

The above example indicates in a preliminary manner how Vizenor breaks down any notions that words can have static, definite meaning. If we accept a one-dimensional signification of such a word as "heirship," then the potential to understand the exploitation that has occurred in connection with the word is lost; Vizenor literally "educates" the reader through word play and through Bearheart's anecdotes not just by showing that there are political reasons that "heirship" has lost its meaning but also by evoking distrust in what might appear to be static meaning behind any word or sign.

Vizenor's larger scheme with respect to word games has to do with his deconstruction of "terminal creeds," which are essentially static, non-dynamic systems of belief. In the interview cited above, Vizenor discusses his concern about the Indian identity "stuck in coins," or the notion of "Indian" within certain narrow criteria that make Indians "artifacts." "Terminal creed" is a general term describing how people fall victim to "the belief that there is only one true way" (Velie, *Four Masters* 130). In citing Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, Louis Owens elaborates on the term:

"Terminal creeds" in *Bearheart* are beliefs which seek to fix, to impose static definitions upon the world. Whether those static definitions arise out of supposedly "traditional" Indian beliefs or out of the language of privileged Euramerica, they represent what Bakhtin terms "authoritative discourse," language "indissolubly fused with its authority—with political power" as a prior utterance. (231)

The way in which Vizenor works out the problem of heirship discussed above is an example of how he exposes a "terminal creed," and although that example works mainly on the level of pun and the sound of words, *Bearheart* shows us how a static definition of heirship is one literally dictated by the "authoritative discourse" of governmental bureaucracy. Owens's observation that terminal creeds represent the discourse of authority—and that Vizenor takes a special interest in exposing and tearing them down—reinforces the idea that Vizenor is interested in seeing language as it develops an Indian identity as dynamic and dialogic.

In *Other Destinies* Owens explains in an exhaustive manner what Vizenor does with terminal creeds in *Bearheart* (chapter 8). Although there are many examples of characters victimized by their terminal creeds, the most important one for this discussion of Indian identity comes when the pilgrims arrive at the walled town of Orion where the hunters and breeders live. The character of central interest in this episode is Belladonna Darwin-

Winter Catcher. A mixedblood, “Conceived and born at Wounded Knee” (190), Belladonna is “the most obvious victim of terminal creeds” because she “attempts to define herself as ‘Indian’ to the exclusion of her mixedblood ancestry and, more fatally, to the exclusion of change” (Owens 232). When Belladonna gives her talk to the people of Orion about “tribal values,” she exposes herself as espousing static, either/or notions of Indian identity. When asked by a hunter, “Are you telling me that what you are saying is exclusive to your mixedblood race?”, she replies, “Yes! . . . I am different than a whiteman because of my values and my blood is different . . . I would not be white.” The problem here of course is that she *is* part white, and even if she weren’t, the hunter proves the ultimate impossibility of telling how she is “so different from whitepeople” (194). Perhaps because her notions of tribal values are so static, Vizenor shows how meaningless they can be by making most of the ideas in her speech vague and clichéd.

Of more central importance in the Orion episode is how the hunters thoroughly deconstruct Belladonna’s concept of “Indian”: “‘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?’” (195). Her idea of Indian is proven to be a nonsensical terminal creed not only because her invention is static and “den[ies] possibilities of the life-giving change and adaptation at the center of tribal identity” (Owens 233), but because the word and sign “Indian” is a construction created by the same white colonizers she deplors.

Another way in which Vizenor deconstructs the problem of invented Indian identities has to do with the novel’s representations of what Bakhtin terms “corporeality” (169). When I use that term I mean the ways in which the body is represented, especially with respect to the accounts of sex, death, cannibalism, eating; in many places these activities occur at the same time. There are very few representations of the body not juxtaposed to gruesome violence, and the hyper-violence of *Bearheart* functions in significant ways with respect to Vizenor’s undoing of terminal creeds. Indeed, as *Bearheart* says, the novel is about “sex and violence” (xiii). Vizenor himself acknowledges the disturbing and seemingly excessive violence of *Bearheart*. In the *MELUS* interview, he says,

In the novel *Bearheart*, the thing that troubles most people is the violence. Friends or acquaintances say, “You frighten me. I had no idea that there was that kind of violence in you.” Surprise, that beneath that smile there is potential violence. And it’s exactly the lesson I offer about violence. . . . To deny violence is to create victims, ultimate victims, people who can



be controlled merely by the symbolic appearance of violence. Because to deny violence, to control people, all one needs to do is suggest violence. The novel is about that, people who've denied violence and all of a sudden violence is with them, and they can't respond. They break down: they have no experience with it. Violence is separated from real experience. (43)

As Vizenor mentions, he gives his reader a large dose of violence that is so continuous and unrelenting that it may seem gratuitous to the end that people might be able to deal with it and not sweep the repressed potential for violence in life under the rug. But the purpose he outlines above takes us back to one of the functions of the trickster posture Vizenor takes in the novel. Through the trickster narrative, Vizenor is trying to throw our delusions off balance, and to do that, as he puts it, "some upsetting is necessary." Much of the upsetting comes through corporeality, and as Velie puts it, it comes in a way that combines "violence with humor" (*Four Masters* 132).

As Velie notes, "The combination of humor, fantasy, violence, and explicit sex is nothing new in literature" (*Four Masters* 134). The exaggerated representations of sex, violence, and corporeality have a satiric function common in comic and novelistic discourse (see Owens 225-27), which parallels trickster discourse. In his essay, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," Bakhtin explains the satiric, subversive function of violence and corporeality in the novel, an explanation which helps justify much of it in *Bearheart*:

Amid the good things of this here-and-now are also to be found false connections that distort the authentic nature of things, false associations established and reinforced by tradition and sanctioned by religious and official ideology. Objects and ideas are united by false hierarchical relationships, inimical to their nature; they are sundered and separated from one another by various other-worldly and idealistic strata that do not permit these objects to touch each other in their living corporeality. These false links are reinforced by scholastic thought, by a false theological and legalistic casuistry and ultimately by language itself—shot through with centuries and millennia of error . . . It is necessary to destroy and rebuild the entire false picture of the world, to sunder the false hierarchical links between objects and ideas, to abolish the divisive ideational strata. It is necessary to liberate all these objects and permit them to enter into the free unions that are organic to them . . . (169)

The "false links" and hierarchies Bakhtin refers to come from the same

official, authoritative discourse which, as Owens tells us, produces terminal creeds, and Bakhtin explains that one of the functions of the novel is to “sunder” this old picture of the world in order to restore a vision of the authentic nature of things. This is one of the reasons Belladonna Darwin-Winter Catcher gets her “just desserts”: In her case language and its terminal creeds distort reality in a harmful way, similar to the either/or notions of “Indianness” discussed earlier, and her death is one way Vizenor “destroys and rebuilds the entire false picture of the world.”

Bakhtin develops his argument about the process of “disunification” with a thorough study of Rabelais’s work, which has many elements similar to Vizenor’s (see Velie, “The Trickster Novel” 128-30). Of particular interest to this reading of *Bearheart* is Bakhtin’s notion of the “series” of the body in Rabelais:

The disunification of what had traditionally been linked, and the bringing-together of that which had been traditionally kept distant and disunified, is achieved in Rabelais via the construction of series of the most varied types. . . . All these widely varied series can be reduced to the following basic groups: (1) series of the human body, in its anatomical and physiological aspects; (2) human clothing series; (3) food series; (4) drink and drunkenness series; (5) sexual series (copulation); (6) death series; (7) defecation series. (170)

Each of these “series” can be found throughout *Bearheart*, and Vizenor’s use of them in the novel serves a similar purpose of “disunifying” false conceptions and terminal creeds.

A particularly telling example of how these body series function in *Bearheart* is evident in the episode in which the circus pilgrims arrive at Sir Cecil Staples’ trailer ruins in What Cheer, Iowa. The Evil Gambler has a “mixedblood horde of mercenaries” working for him, doing his dirty work. Particular elements of the Rabelaisian body series apply directly to the horde in disunifying the terminal creeds which entrap them. The “clothing series” is evident immediately, as the narrative gives a careful description of their dress: “The three mixedbloods, dressed in diverse combinations of tribal vestments and martial uniforms, bangles and ideological power patches and armbands, watched the hands talking over [Bishop Parasimo’s] head and then looked at each other. Deep furrows of ignorance and intolerance stretched across their unwashed foreheads” (103). Just like Sagima with her plastic bear claws at the beginning of the novel, these mixedbloods’ clothing reveals an association between dress and an assumed identity based on ideology in the “power patches and armbands,” and “ignorance and intolerance” which characterizes these mixedbloods. Doctor Wilde Coxwain makes an accurate comment on their attire in the same episode: “Breathing

plastic artifacts from reservation main street . . . Would you look at their uniforms, all beads and plastic bone and chicken feathers. My, my, my” (104). As Owens points out, “the three killers feel themselves, with some accuracy, to be victims of white America” (235). Indeed the main characteristics of each of the three comes from some sort of persecution, yet each creates his own doom from being caught up in a terminal creed probably originating from individual “victimist histories.” The “human clothing series,” then, proves to be an important element in Vizenor’s exposure of the mixedbloods’ entanglement within terminal creeds.

On a more grotesque level, Vizenor connects the sex series with death and eating in the numerous representations of rape, murder, mutilation, and cannibalism—cannibalism always being linked to death and eating. The most disturbing instance occurs when the pilgrims come to the Witch Hunt Restaurant which serves all kinds of human meat and body parts; the proprietors collect their meat from the corpses of people who die walking along the highway. At the end of this episode, Vizenor combines nearly all of the body series in the account of the death of Zebulon Matchi Makwa—who is himself a victim of terminal creeds, as his identifying expression indicates: “Our women were poisoned half white.” Matchi Makwa’s repetition of this phrase shows that he, like *Belladonna Darwin-Winter Catcher*, is also entrapped in a terminal creed that deflates any possible value in mixedblood identity. His death, which occurs while wearing the Bishop’s metamask of *Princess Gallroad*, happens when he is having sex with one of the witches the food fascists have hung from the rafters of their restaurant. The prominence of the mask indicates an interesting adaptation of the clothing series, and not surprisingly, masks and costumes are also common in trickster traditions (Babcock 180). The scene is perverse, even to the food fascists, as one of them comments, “No one but the devil would believe this . . . A woman fucking a witch in our restaurant . . . Make it good you devils because this is your last perversion in the world” (180). After the food fascists kill them, they are decapitated and “stuffed together into a giant handpowered meat grinder,” to be transformed into meat for the customers. The violence and perversity and the manner in which Vizenor mixes the sex/body/death/clothing/eating series functions as an ultimate example of the disunification of false hierarchies Bakhtin outlines: the scene destroys and upsets “the established hierarchy of values,” and “The traditional image of the human being in literature is also re-structured in a radical way” (192). Barbara Babcock makes the connection between the perversity of episodes like this and tribal trickster traditions; episodes involving fantastic perversities have a specific purpose: “the exaggeration to the point of caricature of natural and cultural features represented in . . . masks and costumes, with grotesqueness and monstrosity of half-human, half-animal monsters, is a

primordial mode of abstraction. The exaggerated figure becomes an object of reflection, teaching the neophytes to distinguish between the different ‘factors’ of reality” (180). Applied to Vizenor’s trickster agenda in *Bearheart*, the radical re-structuring takes place in disturbing scenes like this to debunk and upset what the voices of authority say Native American identity consists of, giving a more multi-faceted view of the “different ‘factors’ of reality.”

To suggest that Vizenor posits some sort of ideal notion of “Indian” in the process of breaking down and exposing false conceptions of that identity would be to fall into even more terminal creeds. The Indian stuck in coins—the Indian of Belladonna Darwin-Winter Catcher—is a static invention and does not exist in reality. Cultural survival requires change, growth, adaptability, as Leslie Silko suggests effectively in the character of Betonie, the mixedblood, eclectic medicine man in the novel *Ceremony*. When Betonie describes his ceremonies to Tayo, the novel’s protagonist, he tells Tayo that people must always change—if they stay the same they lose their power. Betonie tells Tayo, “things which don’t shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want” (126). Vizenor, too, argues that the identities of Native Americans must be dynamic and adaptable, like Betonie’s ceremonies, and like characters in *Bearheart* such as Proude Cedarfair and Inawa Biwide, who move into the fourth world at Pueblo Bonito, having successfully resisted succumbing to terminal creeds.

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## ***Liminal Landscapes: Motion, Perspective, and Place in Gerald Vizenor's Fiction***

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Bradley John Monsma

A popular outdoor magazine pictures a common baseball cap modified to aid the growing activity of night-hiking. A thin rod tipped by a small sphere extends about a foot from the bill. By fixing his or her gaze upon the sphere but attending to shapes and motion on the periphery, the hat-wearing hiker takes advantage of the parts of the retina most efficient in darkness. One experienced night-hiker says, "Peripheral vision registers everything around you and forces you from the anxiety of focussed vision. This is a holistic way of orienting yourself in the landscape and in the world at large" (*Backpacker* 15). The night-hiker's conception of vision redeems a sense most often theorized as a gaze meant to control and dominate. The cultural historian Donna Haraway also claims renewed potential for sight metaphors when she brings to bear the specific perspectives of feminism upon scientific projects: "feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*" (188). Haraway refines her perspective, trusting the views from the depths and peripheries. She recognizes the danger in "romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions" as she writes, "Subjugation is not grounds for an ontology; it might be a visual clue. Vision requires instruments of vision; an optics is a politics of positioning" (191, 193). And what one looks at is sometimes as important as how one looks. For Annie Dillard, not one way of looking at a red-winged blackbird works as a hundred disappear into a tree. She writes, "nature is very much a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't affair. A fish flashes, then dissolves in the water before my eyes like so much salt. Deer apparently ascend bodily into heaven; the brightest oriole fades into leaves" (16).

In an epigraph to his autobiography, *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors*, the mixedblood Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor quotes Primo Levi: “someone who lives at the margins of the group, or actually isolated . . . can leave when he wants to and can get a better view of the landscape.” Vizenor’s own writing, spanning three decades and multiple genres, shuttles between forest and clearing, permeating the boundary of the treeline where the “written word leaves a different footprint” (*Earthdivers* 166). Vizenor demonstrates the persistence of oral traditions, inviting readers to join the text in a performance of mythic spaces. Readers follow Vizenor’s treeline trail “made as a visual event between imaginative creators, tellers, and listeners” (*Earthdivers* 166). Through wild humor and a comic worldview, Vizenor plays the role of the compassionate trickster to help us understand that landscapes, like words, are simultaneously shifting and meaningful: he writes, “Native American Indian stories are told and heard in motion, imagined and read over and over on a landscape that is never seen at once” (*Narrative Chance* xiii).

Indeed, the meanings of Vizenor’s physical landscapes shift through the course of his writing. By placing his texts within oral traditions that view language as action, Vizenor gradually resolves through the course of his writing an initial tension between regenerative wild stories and urban artifice. Vizenor’s trickster creations—oral texts, so to speak—play on the border between the mythological and the historical, the figurative and the physical, and suggest new ways to articulate relationships between language and the land, thus humans and their surroundings. To map human movement across significant landscapes in Vizenor’s fiction is to tie experimental narratives to the politics of physical places. The spatiality of his narratives suggests inventive yet historical understandings of the diversity of Native American relations to place.

In an important precedent in the spatial poetics of Native American fiction, William Bevis identifies “homing in” as a common pattern in Native American novels. In contrast to characters in mainstream American novels for whom leaving home for new places and opportunities is “the basic premise of success in our mobile society,” Native American (often mixed-blood) protagonists tend to resolve their wanderings in the Anglo world by returning to their places of origin and affirming tribal identity (Bevis 582). Bevis’s argument works especially well with *House Made of Dawn*, *Ceremony*, *Winter in the Blood*, *Love Medicine*, and other novels of what has been called the “Native American Renaissance,” showing them to present, beyond their many differences, “a single, eloquent argument against de-reservation and assimilation” (618). However, Bevis’s thesis is less helpful in accounting for the movement of Gerald Vizenor’s characters who often end up in places far from where they start, having no homes to return

to. Vizenor's images of mobility simultaneously recall historical incidents of forced migration endured by many tribes and criticize popular perceptions of Indians as mystically tied to the land—the indigenous environmentalists.

The foundation of Vizenor's writing about place and movement is his retelling and revitalization of Anishinaabe stories collected by the anthropologist Victor Barnouw. In one of Vizenor's rewritings, the compassionate Anishinaabe trickster, Naanabozho, climbs to the top of a tree with the water rising around him. Finally, only his nose breaks the surface. Having defecated, Naanabozho finds the situation intolerable and calls on the earthdivers—beaver, otter, and muskrat—to go beneath the water and return with some earth. When the lowliest of the three, muskrat, succeeds, the trickster takes some grains of sand and tosses them about to create new islands on which the Anishinaabeg and all creatures can live. Barnouw's narrator/informant prefaces his story by pointing out that "The story I'm going to tell you won't be about this earth. It will be about a different world" (*People Named the Chippewa* 8). And yet the mythic story results, in spite of Naanabozho's self-interested foibles, in the creation of the historical home of the Anishinaabeg. Vizenor reminds us that:

The past is familiar enough in the circles of the seasons, woodland places, lakes and rivers, to focus a listener on an environmental metaphor and an intersection where the earth started in mythic time, where a trickster or a little woodland person stopped to imagine the earth. The tribal creation takes place at the time of the telling in the oral tradition. (*People* 7)

For Vizenor's characters who find themselves estranged and dispossessed from homelands that are often destroyed, the ongoing creation in metaphor and performative language offers hope for what Vizenor terms "survivance," where myth both responds to and shapes new places.

Vizenor's first novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), envisions a post-apocalyptic world in which a tribal woodland in Minnesota is the last place of grace resisting the "gasless and dark" cities. Expelled from the soon-to-be-logged woodland, Prude Cedarfair and his wife Rosina journey along the empty freeways of an expired world with their mongrels and clown crows. As they travel southwest, they gather the wounded from a spent civilization, finally arriving at the fictional Walatowa Pueblo near a stone arch—the vision window to the next world. N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* ends in a similar landscape with the mixed-blood Abel running in a ceremony that reintegrates him into tribal life and confirms his place in the landscape. Vizenor ends *Bearheart* by appropriating a Native Southwest emergence myth. Prude Cedarfair and a trickster companion float through the vision window into the next world.



While *Bearheart's* mythic universe combines the Anishinaabe earthdiver myths alluded to at the novel's outset with the Southwest emergence myths at the conclusion, the novel also engages the myths of the dying world. The journey motif encourages comparisons to the pilgrimages of Chaucer and Bunyan and to American road novels (Roemer 187). But as Louis Owens suggests, the novel "more pointedly" parodies "the westering pattern of American 'discovery' and settlement" (229). In the traditional story of the American frontier, seeking elbow room and lighting out for territories free from physical and psychological constraint end in the discovery of new places in a wilderness made visible and substantive only when molded to values of production. Vizenor's parody reorients the frontier and questions the notion of discovery by reintroducing the mythic contexts of people who already live there. But despite the novel's suggestion that new worlds may be attainable through performative language, it still leaves its characters in motion, continually moving away from their original landscapes and their first home.

Vizenor's irony suggests, however, that the ascent into the next world ought not to be read as an escape from time and space. Rather, Vizenor's parody of the tragic myth of discovery and identity founded upon limitless mobility bears the shadow of the comic vision essential to all of Vizenor's work despite containing what the author has called his "darkest visions" (Coltelli 166). Lest readers think that for the pilgrims the journey represents only dispossession, Proude's wife Rosina calls for a new mythic home when she says, "We are seeking nothing more than a place to dream again" (210). As they approach the vicinity of the vision window they meet the sacred clowns who subvert the power of progression without ceasing movement altogether:

Walking forward but seeing backward. . . . Seeing in time  
what we invent in passing. . . . Birds and animals see behind  
their motion. Place and time lives in them not between them.  
Place is not an invention of time, place is a state of mind, place  
is no notched measuring stick for memories from here to there.  
. . . (238)

The words of the clowns suggest that the failure of positivistic progress does not mean motion and change are impossible or doomed. Motion is tied to place and dependent upon imagination not discovery. Placing oneself in a new landscape involves imaginative interaction with places of the past as well as with the ground beneath one's feet. Those who view the world comically, through multiple temporal and spatial perspectives, gain entrance to the next world.

Furthermore, even if Proude Cedarfair and his trickster companion leave

the third world (and their companions) behind, the earth itself remains tricksterish in its resilience and becomes a model of what Vizenor later terms “survivance”: “Since the end of gasoline, weeds were growing over the asphalt roads. Tough flowers crept over the unused shoulders of the road and sprouted from cracks and potholes. . . . In time trees would take root and turn the cement and asphalt to dust again” (*Bearheart* 51).

With the cedar forest gone forever, the two tricksters choose to participate in the mythic stories of different people in a new land. But questions remain: does the mythic finale calm the chaos and balance evil as the favored male tricksters abandon Rosina to a fictional world so violent as to be difficult for a polite scholar to describe? Is the flight a celebration of the liberating potential of trickster imagination? Or is it merely an escape at great cost? Does the masculinity of the tricksters suggest gendered limits to imaginative liberation?

*Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, Vizenor’s second novelistic trickster romp ending in flight, more clearly addresses gendered trickster resistance and the cost of escape. Griever de Hocus, already a mixedblood, combines the burgeoning sexuality and culture-bringing compassion of the Anishinaabe trickster with the impulsive violence of the Monkey King in the Chinese classic *Journey to the West* to form a cross-cultural force for liberation in a communist hegemony that preaches and enforces terminal creeds. Griever creates chaos in crowded markets, frees chickens and political prisoners, and has sex with the daughter of a communist official. Louis Owens writes that Vizenor “demonstrates the trickster’s ability to transcend both spatial and temporal repressions” to create what Foucault calls “heterotopias”—the “particular spaces of resistance and freedom”—a “world without map or chronology” (241). But as in *Bearheart*, Vizenor suggests that the imagination of new spaces, especially by tricksters, can be problematic. Toward the end of novel, Hester, the woman pregnant with Griever’s child, drowns herself in a pool littered with the “blue bones of babies” to escape the rage of her father (225). Enraged, Griever takes off in an ultralight airplane toward Macao with a mixedblood Chinese woman and a rooster. Since those searching for Griever do not know whether or where he landed, the book’s ending provides an opportunity to reaffirm faith in the trickster’s immortality. What could be a rather subdued ending for a trickster narrative may be rescued by Griever’s final words: “This is a marvelous world of tricksters” (235).

As in *Bearheart*, the male trickster survives and transcends an oppressive place that claims the female companion. But more than in *Bearheart*, *Griever* raises questions of gender throughout its text. In one scene recalling Anishinaabe oral narratives, Griever transforms himself to satisfy his own desire. Gendered pronouns become ambiguous as Griever

gradually becomes female to have sex with a lesbian (55). But elsewhere, Griever's will is less clearly in control. He meets Hua Lian, an old actress connected to the Monkey King through the pictures on her embroidered sleeves and her salutes to caged animals. Hua Lian invades Griever's dreams and confuses him in conversation, upping the chaotic ante until Griever complains "nothing makes sense on this train" (118). She even steals his language, and the puzzled Griever insists, "you got that line from me this afternoon" (121). After the death of Hester and the unborn child, when Griever is reduced to screaming into panic holes, Hua Lian tells stories "to honor the children and Hester Hua Dan" (227). She perpetuates a life-affirming culture when Griever is at his weakest moment.

Alan Velie suggests that placing the trickster in the context of a postmodern novel humanizes the trickster and makes him more vulnerable (133). One might account for this in Bakhtinian terms: the dialogic novel introduces other voices to the trickster's tale and confronts the trickster with, perhaps, other tricksters. But in the end, the result may be similar to Native American trickster cycles in which no single tale as distinguished in translation can reveal trickster nature as can the composite moving easily from event to event. In performative contexts, the tales contain their own implicit questionings. A single trickster, Griever, can fill a novel with the humor of wild but often anticlimactic liberations. But his flight, more reminiscent of the Monkey King in *Journey to the West* than of Naanabozho, suggests that the ability to imagine new spaces over the horizon does not necessarily transform sites of oppression. The storytelling of Hua Lian fills the space abandoned by Griever, presenting a more transforming alternative. Her trickster spirit is accompanied by memory which bears culture even in the midst of oppression. If Griever is the wandering irreverent trickster of enormous appetites and inspired action, Hua Lian is the trickster as culture hero who provides the tools to remake the present world.

The cross-cultural play of *Griever* encourages still more border crossings which may clarify the novel's suggestions concerning relationships between gender, flight, and cultural memory. Images of flight permeate Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, from the suicidal leap of love on the first page to the story of the flying Africans which helps Milkman Dead to uncover his buried history by the book's end. But unlike Griever who simply fires up the ultralight, discards the extra weight, and takes off, Milkman learns to fly only after the land has claimed him. The forest strips away his car, watch, and street shoes. In darkness he sits on the ground with the roots of a sweet gum tree "cradling him like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather" (279). His flight begins when he walks the land "like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable

there—on the earth and on the place where he walked” (281). In acknowledging earthly connections, Milkman’s flight differs from the mythic flight of Shalimar who leaves behind his family. In Morrison’s mythic history, the people left behind, like Vizenor’s Hua Lian, carry on the culture: “it was the children who sang about it and kept the story of his leaving alive” (332). If those who remain maintain oral history (and thus learn to fly), it is appropriate that *Song of Solomon*’s best flyer is Pilate, the person most rooted, who without moving directs Milkman’s search through stories. Pilate, who exhibits trickster characteristics in her unusual physical presence and her ability to transform herself, could fly “[w]ithout ever leaving the ground” (336).

Both *Griever* and *Song of Solomon* mediate between flights of resistance and their costs. Informed by Morrison’s novel one can see how the trickster Hua Lian’s rootedness and the suggestion that she transforms her place presents a critique of Griever’s perpetual motion. Her linguistic creativity reveals Griever’s arrogance; she unites a wild imagination and revolutionary humor with a sense of responsibility. Hua Lian represents better than Griever Vizenor’s interpretation of the Anishinaabe Naanabozho as compassionate and creative.

If *Bearheart* and *Griever* celebrate and critique trickster movement, Vizenor’s more recent fiction develops the idea that imagination can begin to reclaim the world’s most desecrated spaces. Vizenor’s writing reminds readers that forced flight or migration does not always mean complete cultural loss for tribal peoples. Indeed, others have also pointed out that places not chosen, such as tribal lands in Oklahoma or Turtle Mountain in North Dakota, have become home, “a place to love and be irritated with” in Louise Erdrich’s words (24). Spaces once representing dispossession have, through time and use, become places which center communities and locate those who for a time have dispersed. Urban spaces, too, have been reclaimed to establish new borderlands that support complex identities. The August powwow surrounded by concrete in the heart of Orange County, California, for example, is part tourist attraction, part market, and part community gathering.

In Vizenor’s 1991 short story “Landfill Meditation,” we hear of Martin Bear Charme, who purchases a mud flat adjacent to San Francisco Bay with a federal loan and fills it with garbage to create a landfill reservation from which he teaches courses on meditation. Bear Charme becomes the trickster of Vizenor’s contemporary earthdiver stories, making new places out of a mess: “Words,” he says, “are rituals in the oral tradition, from the sound of creation, the wisps of visions on the wind” (“Landfill Meditation” 99).

The story comically inverts the histories of reservations and tribal homelands mapped out according to the uselessness of the land to American

progress, then redrawn with discoveries of gold or uranium. Vizenor presses to metaphoric limits the ironies of landscapes where the dominant culture alters territorial boundaries and material values while assigning to the people on the land a worthlessness that remains stable. Bear Charmé says:

on the reservations the tribes were the refuse. We were the waste, solid and swill on the run, telling stories from a discarded culture to amuse the colonial refusers. Over here now, on the other end of the wasted world, we meditate in peace on this landfill reservation. (101)

Here Bear Charmé transforms the tragic as mythic America comes to its utopian end on the West Coast—consumer culture burying its trash, out of sight, out of mind.

By associating territorial dispossession with the image of people as refuse, Vizenor's fiction pointedly recalls the anthropologist Mary Douglas' description of symbolic filth as "matter out of place." In both formulations, the perception of waste depends not upon material essence but context. As always, shifting contexts become the raw material for the trickster's symbolic inversions and the imaginative play which gives hope to Charmé's land reclamation project. Along with Bear Charmé the earth itself becomes the contradictory shape-shifter, transformed and nurturing but still containing the waste of a humorless culture.

In the 1991 novel *The Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor develops the reterritorializing project begun in "Landfill Meditation." Columbus's ancestors, "crossblood" and estranged from conventional Minnesota reservation politics, subvert discovery myths by imagining Columbus to have been Mayan.<sup>1</sup> They then steal (or liberate) the genes of the explorer from the London bank vault of a colonialist historical association and settle an island on the border between the U.S. and Canada to establish a new sovereign nation dedicated to healing. Vizenor establishes a fictional borderland, a new frontier not discovered but imagined, to accommodate the complex identities of his mixedblood characters. By mediating between fixed political entities, the constructed spaces of Vizenor's contemporary tricksters deconstruct nationalist representations of place and become a magnet drawing the displaced. As the wounded from a chemical civilization converge upon "the last place on the earth that would heal their wounds with no conditions" (*Heirs* 146), the heirs piece body parts together like mixedblood tribal stories.

The mass healings in the new nation emphasize a crucial development in Vizenor's spatial poetics. As a new borderlands, the nation is marked by multiple crossings. It is not an escape for particular tricksters or a walled enclave designed to protect the chosen from outside evils. Rather, the new

frontier grounds multiple subjectivities and creativity.<sup>2</sup> The heirs even offer mixedblood status to all. Rather than require blood quanta which “have reduced tribes to racist colonies” the heirs allow anyone to become tribal. Through genetic implant “Germans, at last, could be genetic Sioux, and thousands of coastal blondes bored with being white could become shadow tribes of Hopi, or Chippewa” (162). With a parody of post-*Dances With Wolves* Indian popularity, the ironies of the trickster author frustrate seekers of racial and national “purity.”

Vizenor also frustrates those who would glean from his fictions practical understandings of tribal territorial politics. The novel’s seductive refrain on sovereignty, spoken first by a federal judge, reads like the culmination of Vizenor’s spatial poetics: “The notion of tribal sovereignty is not confiscable, or earth bound; sovereignty is neither fence nor feathers. The essence of sovereignty is imaginative, an original tribal trope, communal and spiritual, an idea that is more than metes and bounds in treaties” (*Heirs* 7). The words fit well with Vizenor’s emphasis on mythic flexibility and the viability of multiple subjectivities. The statement also tugs at legal discourses in which greater degrees of racial purity and unbroken ties to original places enhance tribal land claims. But only in postmodern fictions are legal discourses so receptive to the imaginative play of recently created communities. Of course, this is the point.

Vizenor’s recent writing continues to disrupt the boundaries that limit the scope of his early writing. For example, his latest novel, *Dead Voices: Natural Agonies in the New World* (1992), infuses urban spaces with the wilderness to support the stories of survival. Comprised of the tales told to a narrator by Bagese, an old woman living in a dirty apartment adjacent a bus stop in Oakland, California, the novel envisions from their own perspectives the stories of the fleas, squirrels, crows, and others who survive in the cities. Near the end of the book, one says, “I never would have believed that we could be bears in the cities, as we once were at the old treelines. . . . We heard the voices of creation at the airport, the stories that transformed the waste and garbage into dinner. We saw the end, the dead voices in the headlines, and we heard origin stories of animals and birds in the cities” (138). The narrator who listens to Bagese may, like her, come to have “the power and the stories to bring back the dead, even dead voices at a great distance . . . to transform the world” (19). And in a wonderful conditional to keep us wondering about relationships between the figurative and the literal, the narrator adds, “at least in my mind” (19).

In *Bearheart*, Vizenor’s first novel, the forest and the city remain irreconcilable, and the displaced seek visions of other worlds. The displaced heirs of Columbus create a new nation with open borders. The survivors of *Dead Voices*, on the other hand, retain their places in urban landscapes by

telling transforming tales in the most challenging circumstances.

Vizenor's trickster performance reminds us that the land, like mixed-bloods, resists fixity which leads to death. In the essay "The Ruins of Representation" Vizenor quotes Momaday, who in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* writes of his grandmother, who had heard stories of the migration of the Kiowa and "could tell of the Crows, whom she had never seen, and of the Black Hills, where she had never been" ("Ruins" 12). In turn, Vizenor writes of the traces of meaning that survive translations and colonial representations of tribal peoples. Momaday's tale of landscape shaping memory and meaning across generations resonates with Vizenor's narratives in which the land survives not in representations of reality but as an active participant in linguistic play.

One of Vizenor's short story characters, Almost Browne, views the earth as a source of language that preexists human searches for metaphoric raw material: "Words are in snow, trees, leaves, wind, birds, beaver, the sound of ice cracking; words are in fish and mongrels, where they've been since we came to this place with the animals" (*Landfill Meditation* 8). Vizenor, however, remembering the performative language of tricksters at the creation, recreates with tools once removed from the source:

The crows moved from the birch to their silent watch on the black roads as the sun warmed the trailer. The cedar waxwings landed later in the morning, crested, elusive on their return, and minced on the remains of the seasons in the wild fruit trees. Closer to the earth the wind raised the leaves that covered the blue mire over winter and laid bare the wild memories of hidden maidenhair. (*Heirs* 64)

Containing no narrative ties to the courtroom drama surrounding it, the paragraph becomes a prose poem binding the text to a northern woodlands landscape. The black birds in white birch, the freeze-dried fruit, and the uncovered remains of the black-stemmed maiden hair fern, a treasure to find even in summer, suggest a generative sexuality which cannot be reduced to "mother-earth" airiness.

The technique is typical of Vizenor's writing. In his autobiography, Vizenor brings interior landscapes to bear when he writes that the "best stories are survival trickeries on the borders, marcescent blues on the margins, on the colonial curbs" (*Interior Landscapes* 73). The phrases represent Vizenor's spatial poetics at its most metaphorical, and yet the word "marcescent" pokes through the leaves like a bracken fern fiddlehead unfolding further rewards from beneath the abstraction. Sent to the nearest dictionary, I find a definition that uncannily recalls Vizenor's haiku in its attention to the botanical details of place: "Withering but not falling off, as

a blossom that persists on a twig after flowering” (*American Heritage New College Edition*). The definition sounds a note in the resonating theme of “survivance” in Vizenor’s work, riffing repetitions with differences. In the introduction to the book of haiku, *Matsushima: Pine Islands*, Vizenor writes, “Visual scenes from the four seasons decorate our grammars and critical pretensions” (pages unnumbered). The author does not die so much as decompose, and the earth itself becomes the source as “words become dream voices, traces on the wind, twists in the snow, a perch high in the bare poplar” (*Matsushima*). The reader who becomes “the active listener, the creator, set free in a wordless natural place” takes part in creation as a partner with the author and the earth (*Matsushima*). Readers who have seen Vizenor become the trickster of earthdiver stories creating new places from grains of sand sense a completion ensuring continuance.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Vizenor’s strategy of combining revised histories with mythic pasts to create a vision of future possibilities might be compared to Myra Jehlen’s interpretation of omens in Aztec conquest literature which predict a coming apocalypse. Even if the omens grew out of the conquest, Jehlen suggests that by creating the myths, the Aztecs relate the past to the present thus placing a hold on the future. “The effect,” writes Jehlen, “is to release the future—even if only for oppression—by restoring purposeful direction to a present that would otherwise appear to be the end of the world” (11).

<sup>2</sup>In a similar argument about *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*, another trickster text, Geoff Sanborn links distinctive Lakota storytelling conventions and organizational principles to the text’s concern with “the conflict between white and Indian conceptions of history, identity, and property” (40). Through spatial organization and multiple storytellers Lame Deer is able to eliminate “the sense of distance created by linear time” and destroy “the sense of private possession created by univocality” (44). The text ties multivocality to spatiality as it attempts “to break down the fences that are responsible for our typically American sense of rigid identity and private property” (45).

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## ***Waiting for Ishi: Gerald Vizenor's Ishi and the Wood Ducks and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot***

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Elvira Pulitano

“What does Indian mean?”

Vizenor, *Bearheart*

HAM: “We’re not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?”

CLOV: “Mean something! You and I, mean something!”

(brief laugh)

Beckett, *Endgame*

One of the key concepts in much of contemporary thought is that words do not have a definite single function, but fulfill instead many different roles. In a world that has lost its meaning owing to the fact that all the certitudes and unshakable basic values of former ages have been swept away, language has also failed its traditional roles, to define and represent reality. The logical consequence of this preliminary assumption is that words have become inescapably rhetorical, opening up an infinite verbal play where meaning is infinitely deferred. In the most extreme cases, words end up in a meaningless buzzing and flow into silence, a perfect means to express the inexpressible.

It is Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* who first introduces the term “language game.” He compares a word to a chess piece. The word by itself is a dead thing, a mere noise, just as the chess piece itself is only carved wood. What makes this piece of wood into a chess king is first of all the existence of the practice of playing chess. In the same way, utterances are conceived as moves within the language games that make up the human social bond (Wittgenstein 77, 84). The concept of “gaming” has

had an enormous impact on contemporary theories dealing with the issue of language, especially post-structuralism and deconstructionism.<sup>1</sup> These theories have also influenced the work of two seemingly very disparate writers, Gerald Vizenor and Samuel Beckett.

Beckett, the most important representative of the "Theatre of the Absurd," and Vizenor, one of the most significant contemporary Native American writers (mixed-blood Anishinaabe), investigate through their writings the possibility of finding in language a new medium that reveals the reality beyond words. In their devaluation and revitalization of language they attempt to disentangle thought from the conventions and rules which have been fixed by objective systems. For both writers, reality begins outside language and the stage becomes a multidimensional medium which allows the simultaneous use of visual elements, movement, light, and language.

At the heart of Vizenor's writing lies the intent to discard the institutional and academic stereotypes "invented" for Native Americans by Euramerican culture, to liberate his characters and readers and win for all the freedom of realistic growth of continual becoming. He has developed the notion of "terminal creeds," or beliefs that try to fix and impose a static definition upon the world and which he conceives of as being especially suicidal and destructive for Native American people. These beliefs tend to confine and imprison Native Americans in the static, unchanging domain of words as they were once confined in the reservations. Vizenor's didactic intent is clearly illuminated in an interview released in 1981 in which he claims:

I'm still educating an audience. For example about Indian identity I have a revolutionary fervor. The hardest part of it is I believe we're all invented as Indians . . . what I'm pursuing now in much of my writing is the idea of the invented Indian. The inventions have become disguises. . . . We're stuck in coins and words like artifacts. So we take up a belief and settle with it, stuck, static. Some upsetting is necessary. (Bowers and Silet 45-47)

In this intent to deconstruct the notion of "Indianness," the role of the tribal trickster becomes very effective, firstly because it links Vizenor's work to his Anishinaabe culture and secondly because it produces the most functional innovations in evolving a dialogue with his audience.

In the oral tradition, the central role of the trickster is always to challenge and to try to rebalance the world. Different from the image of the trickster we have been presented by Paul Radin, an image "defined" by the "word-constructions" of anthropologists, Vizenor's idea of the trickster is one of an imaginative figure, a "compassionate" figure who mediates between humanity and nature, continuously testing us and attacking

everybody with harsh laughter.<sup>2</sup> Implicit in trickster stories are transformation and innovation, which liberate the mind and contribute to the “survivance” of the tribe.<sup>3</sup> In Vizenor’s words, trickster stories are “holotropes of imagination” and “the postindian simulations of tribal survivance.”<sup>4</sup> By virtue of harsh laughter and humor, tribal narratives become therapeutic, producing in the audience the same cathartic effect of Greek tragedy. According to Louis Owens, Vizenor’s idea of laughter shares many analogies with Bakhtin’s conceptions (*Other Destinies* 224-27). As the Russian critic has observed:

Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comic creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its internal shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. (23)

Bakhtin’s idea of parody in ancient art has as a fundamental goal the unmasking of “ideas and ideologues,” liberating reality from all the strictures and bonds in which language has confined it. This process of stripping down reality, “laying bare the hypocrisies and false fears and pieties,” brings people to face themselves as they really are, to come to terms with crude and senseless worldly fact, to accept it freely without illusions, and to laugh at it. In its liberating, curative effect, this process implicitly leads to change.

Laughter and humor inevitably play an important role in the works of the “Theatre of the Absurd.” Crucial in works such as Beckett’s is the idea that anxiety and despair face contemporary man inhabiting an “absurd” and complex world he is no longer able to comprehend. Areas of impenetrable darkness surround him and the certainty that no one will provide him with ready-made rules of conduct emphasizes his sense of loss and bewilderment. However, by facing up to this anxiety and despair, man is capable of overcoming them, and instead of being drugged into oblivion he sets himself free. The picture of disintegration he’s forced to face activates his critical, intellectual attitude. It sets in motion a process of integrative forces that lead him to become co-creator and co-participant of and within the work of the artist.

This basic assumption applies equally well to Vizenor’s artistic aims. His vigorous satire and effective humor address both the white and the

Indian audience in the final attempt to deconstruct the “invented” concept of “Indianness.” This concept, he claims, does not exist, and can’t exist outside the pages of a book, for no living person, no culture, remains unchanging. In this never-ending challenge Vizenor conceives of himself as a teacher of survival, a “word-maker” in what he calls the contemporary “word-wars.” Blending oral tradition with innovation, he breaks the boundaries of print, engendering life to the static conditions of written ideas. His use of the trickster figure, central to the deliberate ambiguity of most of his writing, has as an immediate effect the “healing” of the reader. Vizenor’s trickster is a challenge to the reader; it tends to “push up his consciousness” in order to make him reformulate and reimagine himself. In an interview Vizenor emphasizes the fact that:

We can be prisoners, and we are, in our bodies. But we can liberate our minds. Tribal people were brilliant in understanding that a figure, a familiar figure in an imaginative story, could keep their minds free. . . . I’m going for trickster consciousness because it’s an ideal healing, because it disrupts the opposites and that creates the possibility for discourse that’s communal and comic. (Blaeser 238)

The “possibility of discourse” involves the participation of the reader, in the same way the audience actively takes part in the traditional storytelling process of Native Americans. His writing originates out of the oral tradition in which words have life in the moment they are released. In this process, they open up new, infinite possibilities that free us from the confines of the text.

Central in Native American oral tradition is the role of the community from which each story originates in the intent of defining the people as a whole. Through songs, ceremony, and sacred stories, the tribes aim at sharing reality, integrating the isolated, private self within a cosmic framework. Through language, through the creative force of words, which implicitly bring adaptation and evolution, the inner self and the private self are blended together in a complete, balanced world.<sup>5</sup> The tribal goal distinctly fits in with many of the mainstream contemporary literary theories that Vizenor incorporates in a very effective way. Umberto Eco’s notion of the “open-work” and Roland Barthes’s idea of the “birth of the reader” neatly combine the intentions of tribal telling and perfectly fulfill Vizenor’s role as a “word-maker” in the eternal struggle for survival.

Vizenor’s *Ishi and the Wood Ducks*, a play in four acts, published in *Native American Literature* (1995), an anthology edited by Vizenor, represents an excellent example of the author’s attempt to devalue and deconstruct the Anglo-European’s “invented” notion of “Indian.” Once

again humor, compassion, and the ironies of the trickster are effectively employed by Vizenor with the intent to liberate the mind of the reader from any kind of constructed stereotype. These artificial images have kept Indians closed in a museum, “frozen” in time, denying them the possibility of living and interacting in the contemporary world as “living” human beings. Vizenor reminds his audience of his didactic intent by ironically using the expression “Postindian Trickster Comedies” as the subtitle of the play.

After working in several forms of artistic media, from the novel to narrative history, short story, poetry, and screen plays, Vizenor turns in *Ishi and the Wood Ducks* to a newly emerging literary form among Native American writers: drama. Like all of the other genres explored by Native American authors, this drama draws the essential theatrical impulse from the ancient lore of the oral tradition, a world in which the creative powers of its participants bring change and innovation each time a story is told, thus providing continuity and survival.

In his introduction to *New Native American Drama*, Jeffrey Huntsman investigates the relative lateness with which Native Americans have turned to drama as a literary form. He claims that “their inclination to theatricality, performance, and most importantly participation in a shared event, has continued to be satisfied by enduring religious practices, powwows, and even the 49s” (x). (A “49” is a time when Indian people, especially young, meet, generally in the countryside, for a night of singing, dancing and conversation, an established time for coming together and renewing strength and identity.)

Native American religious ceremonies are basically dramatic. In their employment of performance, pauses and gestures, intonation and variation in volume, music and song, masks, and non-linguistic utterances, they reveal a multidimensional character which makes these traditions “living” still today. As a literary form of expression, the theatre also makes experience a “living” reality to the audience and involves the co-participation of the spectators. Above all, it displays a language of “living” evidence rather than discursive and demonstrative thought, a language that neither confines nor encloses the possibility of infinite meanings. Within this context, Vizenor’s choice of drama as a literary means to represent Ishi’s “absurd” tragedy becomes extremely significant.

The last survivor of the Yahi, a subdivision of the Yana tribe of California, Ishi was discovered weak and starving in August 1911 in the corral of a slaughter house in Oroville, California. Not knowing what else to do with this “wild man” who understood no English, the county sheriff decided to put him in jail. The story of the discovery of a “primitive man” became headline news and captured the interest of the anthropologists Kroeber and Waterman, professors at the University of California. Ishi was

transferred to the U. C. Berkeley Museum of Anthropology where Professor Kroeber became responsible for him.

Ishi lived in the museum for five years, in a tribal house—ironically a wickiup—that the anthropologists built for him, working in his old crafts of shaping arrows and spears and in the telling of stories (Kroeber 184-214). When he died of tuberculosis on March 25, 1916, a little newspaper of a small northern California town cynically reported:

Ishi, the man primeval is dead. He could not stand the rigors of civilization, and tuberculosis, that arch-enemy of those who live in the simplicity of nature and then abandon that life, claimed him. . . . He furnished *amusement* and *study* to the savants of University of California for a number of years, and doubtless much of ancient lore was learned from him, but *we do not believe he was the marvel that the professors would have the public believe*. He was just a *starved-out Indian* from the wilds of Deer Creek who, by hiding in its fastness, was able to long escape the white man's pursuit. And the white man with his food and clothing and shelter *finally* killed the Indian just as effectually as he would have killed him with a rifle. (Vizenor, *Ishi* 301; italics mine)

Ishi's body was cremated. His ashes were placed in a small pottery jar and transferred to a niche in the Columbarium at Mount Olivet Cemetery near San Francisco.

The story of the last "wild man" of America "imprisoned" within the walls of a museum has always aroused Vizenor's interest. In "Ishi Obscura" the author explores the artificial construction of "Indianness" by referring to this last "primitive man"; according to Vizenor, Ishi's image has been fixed in photograph and his "melancholy comedy" has become a commodity for the Euramerican tradition. However, as the title of Vizenor's essay emphasizes, he is not the last man of the Stone Age:

He is not the obscure other, the mortal silence of savagism and the vanishing race. The other pronoun is not the last crude measure of uncivilization; the silence of that tribal man is not the dead voice of racial photographs and the vanishing pose. . . . Ishi told stories to be heard, not recorded and written, he told stories to be heard as the sounds of remembrance, and with a sense of time that would never be released in the mannered silence of a museum. Overnight he became the last of the stone, the everlasting unknown, the man who would never vanish in the cruel ironies of civilization. (*Manifest Manners* 126-27)

In the telling of the stories, Ishi becomes a "postindian warrior," a tribal



survivalist. He eventually steps out the walls of the anthropological museum, challenging and discarding the “terminal” notion of “indian,” an occidental concept which has “fixed” and “enclosed” tribal people for five centuries.

As Louis Owens has pointed out, “Vizenor makes it clear that Ishi exists forever in the moment of his stories reinventing himself within the oral tradition with each utterance” (“The Last Man” 1-2). The opening words of the play (“Have you ever heard the duck stories?”) provide a catalyst for this basic assumption, while contrasting sharply with the first line of the “Historical Introduction” in which a newspaper report describes Ishi as a “pathetic figure crouched upon the floor.” “Ishi has never been heard as a real person,” Vizenor writes in “Ishi Obscura.” He has rather posed the absent “other” as requested by Euramerican tradition, whose main concern has always been to know the “other” in order to comprehend and define itself. Even his name was not a real name, but an imposed act by Euramerica, which has made the Native survivor a “simulation of manifest manners.” A Yahi word meaning “one of the people,” the name Ishi becomes emblematic of the condition of all indigenous Americans, whose identity has been artificially constructed in the act of superseding their real tribal names. Ishi, however, never told his sacred name, a silence which, along with the telling of the wood duck stories, has ensured him survival and continuity.

*Ishi and the Wood Ducks* begins with an introduction that describes the discovery of the “Aborigine” in Northern California and his subsequent transfer from jail to the museum. Vizenor includes a number of quotations from the people who surrounded Ishi in the museum to emphasize the fact that Ishi perfectly served the function of an “interesting anthropological case.” According to Professor Kroeber, “he has perceptive powers far keener than those of highly educated white men. He reasons well, grasps an idea quickly, has a keen sense of humor, is gentle, thoughtful, and courteous and has a higher type of mentality than most Indians.” Dr. Saxton Pope observes that “he knew nature, which is always true, and his soul was that of a child, his mind that of a philosopher,” a statement that clearly satisfies the stereotype of the “noble savage.”

After the introduction, the play opens with a prologue in which Ishi and an old Gypsy woman named “Boots Story” are waiting on a bench outside a federal courtroom. Boots informs Ishi that she must appear in federal court to get her “real name,” otherwise she will be sent “home,” “everywhere” or “nowhere,” since Gypsies don’t have a fixed country. As a careful reader may observe, the fundamental issues of the play appear in the prologue: the importance of stories, the value of names, but above all, the issue of what it is that determines tribal identity. When Boots says that she might be sent

“home,” Ishi asks her: “How about a reservation?” and she replies “Why, do you need one?” In other words, is the reservation the only determining factor to establish the individual’s belonging to a tribe? A few lines later Ishi asks: “How about a museum of stories?” “Who can remember stories anymore?” Boots replies, and Ishi adds: “That’s why you need a museum.” “Names without stories are the end,” a crucial contradiction to Euramerican tradition, to “lonesome anthropologists,” who started “so many museums” because they “never had their own stories.”

The cast of the play is made up of ten characters, most of whom are based on real historical figures. With the exception of Ishi and Boots, the roles and identities of all the other characters change in each act of the play. This technical device goes back to the trickster mode, the trickster figure’s splitting and assuming different roles in order to ensure continuity and change. Vizenor accounts for this strategy by claiming that “The sense of time, manifest manners, and historical contradictions are redoubled and enhanced by the mutations of identities in the same character” (*Ishi* 302).

The first act of the play is set in the Museum of Anthropology at Berkeley. Ishi sits in front of the “wickiup” flaking arrowheads while Boots has become a custodial worker. Ishi is visited by people associated with the museum, Ashe Miller, a newspaper reporter who tries to interview him, and Prince Chamber, a photographer accompanying her who unsuccessfully attempts to “capture” Ishi into a picture. Later Dr. Pope tries to convince Ishi to show them his home in the mountains and to teach Pope’s son “how to hunt and fish with a bow and arrow.” In the final part of this act, the photographer invites Ishi to “bare his chest since the light is good,” asking him to “pose” for what Vizenor has called “a cultural striptease at the centerfold of manifest manners and the histories of dominance” (*Manifest Manners* 127).

The second act of the play takes place in the Mount Olivet Cemetery Columbarium, seventy years after Ishi’s death.<sup>6</sup> Zero Larkin, a Native sculptor, has come to the cemetery to be inspired by Ishi’s ashes. Prince, the photographer, and Ashe Miller, the reporter, attend the scene in order to record the moment of inspiration. To supervise this “solemn event” two “important figures” are brought on stage: Trope Browne, the attendant at the Columbarium who opens the niche, and Angel Day, the manager of the cemetery association, “an officious expert on tribal histories.” Both of them are ironically used by Vizenor as perfect representatives of the artificial constructors of the “invented Indians,” of whom Zero is the most significant victim.

The third act of *Ishi and the Wood Ducks* centers on the meeting of the Committee on Names and Spaces in Kroeber Hall at the University of California. The aim of the committee is to consider the proposal to rename

the building “Ishi Hall,” a proposal which will not be approved.<sup>7</sup> Throughout this act, as in the previous one, Ishi and Boots, unseen by the other characters, comment upon the actions and words in a chorus-like mode. *Ishi and the Wood Ducks* presents the same circular structure common to many novels of contemporary Native American literature. In these novels the beginning and the ending coincide, ensuring continuity and survival in the eternal moment of *now*.

In Act Four of the play, set in the federal courtroom where Ishi and Boots waited in the prologue, Ishi is brought to court charged with violating the Indian Arts and Craft of 1990, since “he sold objects as tribal made, and could not prove that he was in fact a member of a tribe recognized by a reservation government.” His tribe being ruled extinct, Ishi can’t demonstrate that he belongs to a federally recognized tribe. It is not by mere chance that Vizenor sets the main issue of the play in a court. Court cases are cultural definitions, a further attempt by Euramerica to “establish” and “define” Indians.

In this final act, Kroeber has become the presiding federal judge, Ashe Miller, the prosecuting attorney, Saxton Pope, the defense attorney. Many of the traditional clichés to present Ishi as an “absence” are employed: “Ishi never learned how to read the time, he never heard of Christmas and he has trouble raising a window shade.” In *Manifest Manners* Vizenor has observed that “The absence is not a presence of character,” and the Indian long defined by absences will never be seen as a real character. However, when Pope introduces Ishi’s wood duck stories, those the actual Ishi liked to tell in his museum home—which took seven hours in the telling and could be told only after dark—the tribal character of Ishi is established. After many prevarications and being finally forced to make a decision, Judge Kroeber concludes that “Ishi is real and the law is not. Therefore, my decision is to declare that the accused is his own tribe. Ishi is his sovereign tribal nation, and this is clear and presents evidence of character. . . . Ishi, the man so named, has established a tribal character in a museum and in his endless wood duck stories . . .” (*Ishi* 336).

Contrary to the many attempts of Euramerica to “fix” and “enclose” the Indian in what Vizenor calls “terminal creeds,” making him a static, lifeless relic of the past, the Indian reveals his “living character” in the creative moment of his stories. In the telling of the stories the world is imagined in its eternal changing and mutability. Many possibilities are revealed by means of the infinite power of language, a language which is itself creative, which neither “confines” nor “traps” reality. As Louis Owens has noted:

In *Ishi and the Wood Ducks*, the written advances to the oral, and the co-constructive audience—brought onto the stage by

both Ishi and Judge Kroeber—becomes the active jury and is challenged to deconstruct the Indian, to find the lonesome survivor who, in good humour, honored his sacred name and simply called himself “one of the people.” (“The Last Man” 16)

As noted earlier in this essay, Vizenor’s major intent in his writing is to deconstruct the invented notion of Indianness and to free the audience (both Indian and white) from the most pernicious of the Euramerican stereotypes, those which have “defined” Indians for five centuries. In this process he turns to language as a powerful instrument and invests the written word with the same liberating power he finds in oral culture.

As with any Native American author who creates in a written form the essence of tribal oral tradition, Vizenor’s work is clearly indebted to the writing of mainstream literature, or at least to that kind of writing that is particularly concerned with language as a means to deconstruct reality. *Ishi and the Wood Ducks* presents remarkable analogies with Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and the “Theatre of the Absurd” in general. Though profoundly different in terms of structure and content (this difference all the more comprehensible if we consider the cultural backgrounds of the authors), the plays reveal many parallels in terms of characterization, action, and humor. However, what becomes all the more interesting for the reader, and provides a much more fertile ground for comparisons, is the role that both Vizenor and Beckett attribute to language.

*Waiting for Godot* opens with two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, on a country road by a tree waiting for a Mr. Godot, with whom they believe they have an appointment. Gogo and Didi (the way they refer to each other) are clearly derived from the pairs of cross-talk comedians of music halls who have in Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy, their most significant successors.<sup>8</sup> A remarkable blend of humor punctuates the lines of their dialogue, in which we often see the “straight man” in the attempt to “explain” the intricacies of some problem his partner is trying to elucidate. This verbal ping-pong is frequently interrupted by silences and long pauses out of which arise laughter:

ESTRAGON: And what did he reply?

VLADIMIR: That he’d see.

ESTRAGON: That he couldn’t promise anything.

VLADIMIR: That he’d have to think it over.

ESTRAGON: In the quiet of his home.

VLADIMIR: Consult his family.

ESTRAGON: His friends.

VLADIMIR: His agents.

ESTRAGON: His correspondents.

VLADIMIR: His books.  
ESTRAGON: His bank account.  
VLADIMIR: Before taking a decision.  
ESTRAGON: It's the normal thing.  
VLADIMIR: Is it not?  
ESTRAGON: I think it is.  
VLADIMIR: I think so too. [*silence*] (Beckett 13)

The nature of the dialogue itself aims at originating confusion and misunderstanding: short “telegraphic” sentences with the loss of grammatical structure, the dropping of question marks to suggest the idea that questions don’t necessarily require an answer, the difficulty in finding the right words. These all contribute to the disintegration of language as a means of communication. Moreover, as Martin Esslin has observed, each line tends to obliterate what has been said in the previous sentence so that the characters have difficulty understanding even their own words (61-62). Statements such as “I don’t know” and “I don’t understand” frequently recur in their discourses. Such statements are effectively employed to convey the idea of the “absurdity” in looking for pre-fabricated meaning in a world that offers no more ready-made solutions. Hence all their “bubbling” and disconnected sentences give rise to laughter. This laughter becomes all the more bitter if we consider that it is intended to mask or unmask the “absurdity” of the human condition.

In Vizenor’s play both Ishi and Boots assume this marionette-like mode. In the prologue, we are told that Ishi wears “an oversized suit and tie,” then he “removes his shoes and socks” and “inserts leather thongs in his ears” (302). In the first act of *Waiting for Godot*, we see Estragon involved in a protracted gag of taking off his boots because “they hurt.” Obviously in this pose, Ishi is playing the role of the “funny” man or “funny” Indian, the leather thongs being signifiers of his Indianness. In the author’s humoristic intent, Ishi perfectly embodies the stereotype of the “Dumb Indian,” an artifact of the Euramerican anthropologists. His matched partner, Boots, who wears “a floral print dress with white boots and bold accessories,” is brought on stage to complete his personality. She also functions as an accomplice in the act of ridiculing the people associated with the museum. If misunderstanding and confusion characterize the verbal play of Vladimir and Estragon, Ishi and Boots reveal instead a greater affinity in the process of dealing with the events of the play. Early in the prologue we notice how their discourses follow a logical sequence, the author’s intent being that of illuminating their mutually “absurd” situation:

ISHI: Ishi is my nickname.  
BOOTS: Boots is my sacred name.  
ISHI: No one has ever heard my sacred name.

- BOOTS: No one has ever heard my real name.  
ISHI: Alfred Kroeber gave me a museum name.  
BOOTS: My husband lied to me about our name.  
ISHI: (*to the audience*): Kroeber was an anthropologist and he got me out of jail to live in a museum. (Pause), he was one of my very first friends.  
BOOTS: (*Loud voice*): Raider, my husband, he brought me here, but we were never married, and even my birth records were lost in the war.  
(303)

Throughout the play, this affinity is more and more emphasized and they assume the function of a chorus, commenting upon the external events, even in their simple performing of gestures.

Verbal nonsense and the sequence of humoristic “word-plays” regulate the lines between Ishi and the people of the museum. In Act One, Ashe Miller, the reporter, tries to “entrap” the “wild man” in the classical stereotype pose, by asking him a series of questions to which Ishi does not provide direct answers. “Ishi where shall we begin?” Miller asks in her first pathetic attempt to establish communication with the “primitive Indian.” A blank space on the page follows filled with the word “*silence*.” This symbolic structural device emphasizes the impossibility for the Indian of formulating any kind of “discourse” with a world that has always tried to abuse the “other” by means of words. At the various questions of the reporter, “What is your name?,” “How old are you?,” “Are you married?,” “Do you fear menstruating women?,” the answer is always the same: *silence*. In *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor has pointed out that

Native American Indians have endured the lies and wicked burdens of discoveries, the puritanical destinies of monotheism, manifest manners and simulated realities of dominance, with *silence*, traces of natural reason, trickster hermeneutics, the interpretation of tribal figures, and the solace of heard stories. (16-17; italics mine)

This statement clearly explains Ishi’s final “silence” to Miller’s question: “What are the Wood Duck stories?” In oral tradition, silence and non-linguistic sound function not as an absence of language but as a presence of another kind of communication equal, if not superior, in value to words.

There is logic and coherence in all the apparently “absurd” indirect answers of Ishi in this act of the play. “I’m alone, and my name is not a picture,” he says in reply to the reporter’s observation on the importance of a picture to keep remembrance; pictures are not real while tribal names are,

a concept that Ashe Miller and the other people of the museum find quite difficult to grasp. Ishi's coherent "discourse" reaches its climax when, at the question "Do you know anything?," he answers "Too much pina," "pina" meaning pain, historical pain, universal pain which has kept two worlds separated for five centuries. The inconsistency of Ashe Miller's questions and the ridiculousness of her character arrive at a crucial point when, in an exchange of lines between Waterman and herself, she fails to understand the basic logical assumptions of the discourse:

WATERMAN: Ishi evades direct questions.

MILLER: But you said he was smarter than many college students.

WATERMAN: Yes, he's remarkable, a very lovely man.

MILLER: What other words?

WATERMAN: Ulisi;

MILLER: Ulisi, what does "ulisi" mean?

WATERMAN: I don't understand.

MILLER: How could you not understand "Ulisi?"

ISHI: Don't understand;

WATERMAN: "Ulisi" means not to understand.

MILLER: I understand. (314)

Vizenor's satirical intent is here plainly manifested. Through this idiot-like character he represents the "dumbness" of all those people who have "interpreted" the Indian throughout the centuries, by controlling the definitions, and symbols, by abusing words to construct their "invented" culture.

The second act of the play presents an analogous situation to the extent that it is concerned with the role of language as a powerful instrument to "deconstruct" the invented notion of Indian. Ishi and Boots, at the Mount Olivet Cemetery Columbarium, mockingly listen to Angel Day's statements regarding Ishi's life. Angel, who is an "officious expert on tribal histories," is supposed to be an authority. He answers Ashe Miller's questions by claiming that Ishi made his own burial pot when he lived in the museum, that he was a shaman healing many women in the hospital, and that he wrote his name on the black burial pot. These statements are gradually "discarded" by Ishi and Boots who, with fine irony, reveal how false and artificial they are. When Boots claims that they are "liars," he replies: "Indians are inventions, so what's there to lie about?" Vizenor's effective satire addresses not only the "experts" on the notion of Indian, but even those tribal people who consciously accept entrapment in this notion.

Zero Larkin, the Native sculptor who came to the cemetery to be inspired by Ishi's ashes, is one of them. When Miller asks him: "Zero does it make a difference to anyone that you are not from the same tribe as Ishi?",

he replies: “we are both tribal artists, and that’s our identity.” A few lines later he affirms “We are one as tribal people,” this statement clearly revealing Zero’s accepted notion of the “invented Indian.” In playing this role, he acts like Belladonna in Vizenor’s novel *Bearheart*. When asked to define tribal values, this character makes a series of statements that refer back to the romantic idea/stereotype of the “noble savage”:

We are tribal and that means that we are children of dreams and visions. . . . Our bodies are connected to mother earth and our minds are part of the clouds. . . . Our voices are the living breath of the wilderness. . . . I am different than a white man because of my values and my blood is different. . . . We are different because we are raised with different values. . . . Tribal people seldom touch each other, . . . we do not invade the personal bodies of others and we do not stare at people when we are talking. . . . Indians have more magic in their lives than white people. . . . (194-96)

In the attempt to define herself and all Indians according to static, fixed values, Belladonna has become a symbolic victim of the “terminal creeds,” those definitions that deny change and adaptation as a means of survival.<sup>9</sup>

Language as a “liberating” force is also the main issue in *Waiting for Godot*. In an article that focuses on the postmodern aspect of the play, Jeffrey Nealon observes that Vladimir and Estragon pass the time while waiting by playing at a series of “language games”:

ESTRAGON: Let’s go.

VLADIMIR: We can’t.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We’re waiting for Godot.

This is a sequence that recurs several times in the text, although in modified form. As Nealon suggests, this is meant to convey the idea that when their games collapse or are played out they usually refer back to their “meta-game,” *Godot* (520-21). The play’s culminating moment is reached when, in the middle of the first act, Pozzo and Lucky are introduced. They provide us with the solution to the numerous “language games” performed by the two tramp characters. At a certain point Lucky, the faithful slave of the tyrannical master Pozzo, is asked to “think.” His nihilistic speech expresses a transgression and devaluation of the boundaries of the “ultimate meta-game,” the language of truth (Nealon 524-26).

With disconnected and illogical sentences, randomly put together, Lucky’s long monologue follows the pattern of many of the stream-of-consciousness techniques that characterize contemporary literature. It addresses the popular assumption that language can define reality and reveal



the ultimate “truths.” Against these assumptions it is meant to expose the limits imposed by all objectivist thinking and to deconstruct all notions of universal thought.

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattman of a personal God quaquaquaqu with a white beard quaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambit divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffer. . . . (28)

The very beginning of the monologue clearly reveals Beckett’s artistic intent. Lucky’s “shouted text” is not “nonsense,” nor is it “unreasonable”; it moves instead beyond the limits of the dialectic, beyond the “logical” words, providing “new” modes and new rules for “language games.” During Lucky’s “performance,” Vladimir, Estragon, and Pozzo become quite uneasy to the extent that they attack him physically and ultimately “silence” him because, as Pozzo observes, “there is an end to his thinking.” Lucky’s discourse is disturbing and threatening to the modernist notion of coherence; it discards the basic assumption of objective knowledge, an assumption which is strictly connected with power. In his essay on the contemporary ethical thinker Emmanuel Levinas, “Violence and Metaphysics,” Jacques Derrida claims that “discourse” is originally violent and the philosophical logos is constantly inhabited by war. The philosopher (man) must speak and write within this endless war which he knows is inescapable. A non-violent, “peaceful” discourse—such as Lucky’s discourse—would be the non-essence of discourse and would inevitably end up in non-discourse, a concept startling and disconcerting to modern knowledge (Derrida 116-17). Hence, there is a necessity to silence Lucky’s speech, an act that denies him any possibility of subverting his entrapment. (In the second act of the play he becomes “dumb.”)

In this deconstructive, transgressive function, language also plays a crucial role in *Ishi and the Wood Ducks*. If on one side remarkable analogies make Vladimir and Estragon comparable to the couple Ishi and Boots, on the other side a much more profound affinity can be traced between Ishi and Lucky. Both characters are “tied” by their own subordinate position to an “oppressor.” Both fulfill the role of faithfully serving their “masters.” Lucky obeys Pozzo’s commands and carries his bags; Ishi serves the white man’s cause, becoming an interesting anthropological case. Lucky is asked to “think,” Ishi is asked to “pose” for that cultural “striptease” through which Euramerica has always “confined” and “entrapped” the Indian. Ishi’s answers to the people of the museum contain much apparent verbal nonsense, as we have seen in Lucky’s monologue. “Winotay,” the

word that acts as a prelude to the whole play and which doesn't convey any recognizable meaning, fulfills the same function as Lucky's "quaqua-quaqua." "Winotay," however, is the sound of the song of the wood ducks; it has meaning that is internally persuasive for Ishi, if not for others.

Act Three and Act Four of Vizenor's play assume an important function in their dealing with the issue of language as an unsuccessful means of defining reality. At the core of the events which take place in Act Three is the renaming of the building Kroeber Hall as Ishi Hall. The proposal advanced by Professor Kroeber will not be accepted because, in Trope Brown's words, "established names are histories, not rumours, and these ridiculous nicknames are rumours, nothing more" (324). Later on, when Ishi advances the proposal of renaming the buildings on campus every two years, he is not "seen" by the people of the committee who are unable to "locate his voice." For five centuries Indian people's voices have been silenced by the "dominating" culture. Euramerica has abused them with an act of "intellectual violence," more dangerous and effective than the physical violence to which they have been subjected. However, their voices have continued to be heard. Despite all the many attempts to suppress them, these "voices" incessantly say something; survival itself is preserved in the mere act of the "telling." As Vizenor has pointed out:

There are no separations . . . the war goes on in our stories.  
The wanaki game is our war with the *wordies* and the peace  
of their dead voices. Our seasons are the same at last. We  
must go on. (*Dead Voices* 140; italics mine)

The necessity to speak underlies the basic creeds of *Waiting for Godot*. In one of the most vigorous passages of the play Vladimir and Estragon convey Beckett's essential ideas on the role of language:

VLADIMIR: You're right, we're inexhaustible;

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't think.

VLADIMIR: We have that excuse.

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't hear.

VLADIMIR: We have our reasons.

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like sand.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

*[silence]*

VLADIMIR: They all speak at once.

ESTRAGON: Each one to itself.

*[silence]*

VLADIMIR: Rather they whisper.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

VLADIMIR: They murmur.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

[silence]

VLADIMIR: What do they say?

ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives.

VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it.

VLADIMIR: To be dead is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON: It's not sufficient.

[silence] (40)

These “rustling,” “murmuring” voices are the same voices that ensure survival. Beckett’s conviction that language can’t disclose any meaning is paradoxically contradicted by his writing in which he has found means of expression beyond language.<sup>10</sup> In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin notices this paradox, by claiming that Beckett’s great force originates from the dramatic medium. On the stage it’s possible to unveil what lies beyond the mere reality of words; language can be put in a contrapuntal relationship with action in order to reveal the “unseen.” Each act of *Waiting for Godot* ends with the two tramps saying, “Let’s go,” but the stage direction informs us that “they don’t move,”<sup>11</sup> an example of the importance of action in the play. In spite of his strong feelings that words are inadequate to express the human condition, Beckett’s use of the stage reveals an attempt to eliminate this impossibility, but also a desperate attempt to affirm existence; as the pure voice of Beckett’s *The Unnamable* puts it: “I have to speak, whatever that means. Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak; I have an ocean to drink, so there is an ocean then” (Esslin 63).

In Act Four of *Ishi and the Wood Ducks*, the final “word-game” is played between the protagonist and the people of the museum. The matter of establishing Ishi’s tribal character is brought forth in a federal courtroom, in a place where Euramerica has traditionally exercised its power by “abusing” words. In this final verbal confrontation, the defense attorney, Saxton Pope, and the prosecutor, Ashe Miller, exchange a series of “non-sense” lines that clearly reveal their totalizing self-confidence in the power of “fixed,” established words as a means of legitimating reality. Vizenor’s satire reaches its most culminating/ferocious moment when the prosecutor accuses Ishi of misrepresenting his tribal character. In the prosecutor’s words, Ishi purposely violated the law, having bought an enrolled document from the “Dedicednus” Indians of California. Rounds of laughter are heard through the stage. When Judge Kroeber promptly explains that “Dedicednus” means “undecided” spelled backwards, Pope ironically claims that “undecided” is a condition of character courts. Euramerica’s confidence in

words is false and misleading since language can't rely on any underlying reality, or at least can't define this reality. Whatever decision is taken on the basis of "fixed" Western metaphysics is false and inconsistent since the boundaries of discourse have been proved to be "unreferential" and "unvalidating."

In the "word-wars" that have characterized the relationship between Euramerican culture and tribal people, Indians have been able to survive owing to the sacred power of the oral tradition. Their ability to "imagine" stories, to reshape themselves each time in a different way, has been their only possibility of surviving to the present day. Their ability to examine, question, shift, and change has prevented them from remaining "trapped" in those fixed "terminal creeds" which aim to eliminate them. Ishi's wood duck stories have guaranteed him survival. Despite the many attempts of the court people to ignore them—Ashe claims that oral stories cannot be evidence—they are *evident* and in their endlessness they provide continuity and change. By the end of the play they have acquired a protagonist role. They represent the only living power in a world of "dead voices," of "murmuring rustling." Vizenor's liberating act originates from imagination, from the ability of words to create the universe, a universe where things are in eternal happening. In this primary act of "survivance," humor becomes extremely important owing to its curative effect. Whatever the survivor does, he does in good humor. His endless "play" in the trickster-clown mode is the only way to defy a culture which tends to annihilate him. This conception of play and humor, crucial to postmodern world view, establishes the ground on which Vizenor's idea of art approaches and overlaps Beckett's fundamental assumptions. For both writers, the watchword remains the defiantly terrific, the provoking reply of one of the characters of Beckett's *Endgame*:

CLOV: (*imploringly*): Let's stop playing!

HAMM:                    Never!

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Derrida (278-93), Lyotard, Foucault, and Baudrillard.

<sup>2</sup>Vizenor's emphasis on the term "compassionate" is meant to contrast with Radin's definition of the trickster as an asocial and amoral figure, whose acts are only conceived as disruptive. See Coltelli, *Winged Words* 162-63.

<sup>3</sup>"Survivance" is a word coined by Vizenor, an imaginative invention that makes a statement about his feelings regarding the inadequacy of written language. See

*Manifest Manners* 3-5.

<sup>4</sup>*Manifest Manners* 10-11. The term “postindian” is used ironically by Vizenor to refer to the postindian time after the invention of the “Indian” by Christopher Columbus. The postindian is the absence of the “invention.”

<sup>5</sup>See Owens 13-15. On the same topic, see also Allen 54-56.

<sup>6</sup>Achronology as a structuring device in the play clearly reflects the traditional tribal concept of time. As Paula Gunn Allen has observed, Indian time flows in a circular frame rather than in the linear industrial ordering of Western thought. See “The Ceremonial Motion of Indian Time: Long Ago, So Far,” in *The Sacred Hoop* 147-54.

<sup>7</sup>As a visiting Professor in Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, Vizenor himself, in the Fall of 1985, formally advanced the proposal that the north part of the campus’s Dwinelle Hall (where the Native American Studies Offices were and are still located) be renamed Ishi Hall. The proposal was not approved and originated instead a long “irritating” debate which ended in 1993 when the central courtyard of Dwinelle Hall was named Ishi’s Court. See Owens, “The Last Man” 3 and 5-6.

<sup>8</sup>See Esslin 26-28. On the relationship between the characters and music-hall personae see also Fletcher.

<sup>9</sup>See Owens, *Other Destinies* 232-34.

<sup>10</sup>Beckett himself points out the contradiction of his art in an interview in which he claims: “Writing has led me to silence, still I have to continue. I’m facing a cliff, yet I have to move forward. Impossible, isn’t it? Still, one can move forward, advance a few miserable millimeters.” See Juliet 13.

<sup>11</sup>See Esslin 62-63.

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## ***Doubling in Gerald Vizenor's Bearheart: The Pilgrimage Strategy or Bunyan Revisited***

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Bernadette Rigel-Cellard

Vizenor had already published books of poems and stories before he finally had his first novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, published in 1978. In 1990 it was published again as *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*. Although all the Vizenorian features are already present in Vizenor's work prior to the 1978 *Bearheart* (a surrealistic and highly inventive style, and games of hybridization which are always didactic under a ferocious irony), their staging in this novel is profoundly original compared with the rest of his work and even more so when compared with the other productions of contemporary Native American fiction. A brilliant firework of borrowings from the mythology of the Anishinaabe, or Chippewa, and from Western apocalyptic art and literature, *Bearheart* is not easy to define. At best it can be called an intercultural work, forever withholding the message that one thought one had deciphered, forcing the reader who has not thrown the book through the window by page thirty to embark along with the hero Bearheart and with each horny tribulation to peel off the masks of the misreadings of Indianness.

The first time I read *Bearheart*, I was struck not only by its inventiveness but also by the fact that its random adventures were adroitly channelled within the classical structure of pilgrimage narratives. Under the apparent anarchy of the most barbaric scenes of violence and weird sex, under these comic strips straight out of both tribal comical horror tales and the apocalyptic paintings of Hieronymus Bosch or Pieter Breughel, can be found a coherent progression, a crusade in search of the truth. I felt that Vizenor had accomplished here a parable reminiscent of Dante's *Divine Comedy*,

Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and, perhaps to a larger degree, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

My aim here will be to test this hypothesis through an analysis of how Vizenor doubles or reproduces *The Pilgrim's Progress*—incidentally published almost exactly three hundred years before *Bearheart*, in 1678—in order to describe the initiatory progress of his mixed-blood pilgrims. This implies examining how Vizenor articulates his characters' quest around the same values as those found in Bunyan, that is to say around a meditation on good and evil, but also how Vizenor subverts the quest of the great Calvinist by borrowing the narrative voice for his novel from the lustful trickster hero of the Chippewa, Naanabozho, for this pilgrimage is full of "sex and violence" as the opening "Letter to the Reader" announces just before sinking itself into the first copulation of the book.

Because of this irreverent doubling of the great works of European literature and because *Bearheart* plays with multiple masks and metamorphoses (we witness human beings turning into animals, as well as trans-animal, transsexual, or transreality transformations), this essay will explore Vizenor's process of doubling as a method of fiction writing.<sup>1</sup> Yet, to attempt to analyze *Bearheart* along this line is a frightening challenge because its "staging of the double" is split and multiplied infinitely thanks to an elaboration, not only on the metamorphosis tradition of the Chippewa, but also on that of the fabulists and of the cyberspace virtual reality worshippers. *Bearheart* superimposes strata of meanings exactly where no one sees them, and seldom where one expects to find them. It is a difficult book, very provocative, sometimes *ad nauseam*, which fascinates its reader because it constantly holds back a rational explanation, and I do not pretend to have explored nor understood all the inner linings of its motley coat.

Perfectly aware of my operating in a way that runs counter to the baroque spirit of the novel, I will dissect parts of it to find the elements that echo *The Pilgrim's Progress* and various traditional pilgrimages as well as the elements pertaining to Chippewa mythology. I will summarize it first, then stop at the pact of the pilgrim with the reader, explore the allegories, and finally focus on three emblematic episodes, in the hope of understanding the function of Vizenor's passion for splitting and doubling.

### **Brief summary**

*Bearheart* relates the escape of Proude Cedarfair, or Bearheart, and of his wife Rosina from their homeland, their cedar circus in Minnesota, into a world of semi-science fiction. It is in fact a world fairly close to ours since the cause of the heroes' departure is a shortage of energy supplies (a situation made all the more probable by the oil embargo of the early



seventies) which has led the Federal Government to collapse and, in a last ditch effort to save its most powerful members, to requisition all the trees still standing, in particular the cedars of the few surviving tribal people. On such a doomsday scenario, Vizenor has combined a series of picaresque adventures with colorful characters who join the original couple to form the pilgrims' caravan. They encounter various helpers or opponents, and as in all pilgrimage narratives, they undergo many trials, the outcome of which will be each character's death or rebirth, depending upon his or her understanding of life.

In a state of complete anomie, the pilgrims walk along, or hitch rides on one of the rare cars still running on a full tank, a mail van, a boat, or a train, or they simply levitate. Two dogs and seven crows travel along. They come across good or bad strangers and stop over in inns, cities, and monasteries. In most literature such places are symbolically charged, but their meaning is here parodied. The pilgrims head south and southwest, then while in Oklahoma they veer westward and penetrate, literally, into the land of New Mexico, into the village of Walatowa—which the reader will remember from Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*—in order to be reborn into the fourth world, that of visible reality, in a feat reiterating the Navajo emergence, onto which is grafted a bear transformation, Chippewa or pan-Indian fashion.

### **The pact of the crusader**

Vizenor offers his reader a pact similar to the one chosen by Bunyan. *The Pilgrim's Progress* opens with: "The author's apology for this book," in rhymed verse, while *Bearheart* opens with a "Letter to the Reader," in italics. The metaphysical anxieties of Bunyan found the literary expression of the *Progress* because of the persecutions inflicted upon him by the Church of England, in particular a long prison sentence. *Bearheart* is fictionally born out of similar conditions: a clerk at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bearheart, is narrating the sufferings inflicted by the federal authorities upon Natives. Bearheart is dancing on the file cabinets to protect their chronicles (the heirship chronicles), when a young woman warrior of the American Indian Movement walks in. She is self-righteously sure of the truth of her message, and we know she is condemned since we read: "She smiles, proud to hold freedom in terminal creeds." To which Bearheart replies: "Their freedom is your suicide" (xi). She displays plastic bear claws and chicken feathers. Often in later works, Vizenor denounces such trademark artifacts of the modern "Indian," which are make-believe signatures, as deceptive as the identity of the pseudo-warrior. Fittingly, the girl's statement serves as the starting point of the deconstruction of the stereotypes that contemporary Natives peddle about themselves:

We took this building for tribal people. . . . We are the new warriors out for tribal freedom, but you old fuckers sold out to the white man too long ago to understand the real movement. (xiii)

After some small talk, the girl takes the files out of the drawers and starts reading them just before copulating with the bear/man. The letter thus warns the reader that the Vizenorian leit-motiv of “the terminal creeds,” those of the activists of the American Indian Movement, just as much as those of the Federal Government, will be exposed and pitilessly denounced.

Bunyan presented his story as a dream, and similarly Vizenor’s book is the vision dream of Bearheart, the contents of which are, properly speaking, “The Heirship Chronicles: Proude Cedarfair and the Cultural World War.” The first chapter, “Morning Prelude,” echoes *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in which Bunyan writes:

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place, where was a den; and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and as I slept I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold I saw a man clothed in rags. (39)

In Vizenor’s fiction, the famous wilderness of Bunyan has turned into the cedar circus where Proude Cedarfair “dreams in sudden moods” and “determines his thoughts from morning dreams” (5). There follows in *Bearheart* a genealogy of the successive tribal generations attacked by the missionaries, federal agents, and various other enemies. Our pilgrim belongs to the fourth generation, Cedarfair Fourth Proude, and is married to Rosina Parent. Could we see in the name Rosina an echo of Cervantes’s Rosinante? Perhaps, since Rosina stands for the devoted wife of a modern Don Quixote who, unlike the original one, succeeds in destroying the windmills invented by unenlightened people. Giving the name of a nag to this good woman is not very kind, but it is in keeping with the picaresque spirit of the book. The pilgrims’ caravan will certainly include many Sancho Panzas. As to Rosina’s surname “Parent,” it is easily justified by the fact that she engenders a new race of people in the emergence feat that concludes the book. Vizenor is hence fairly generous with this female character whom he also allows to travel with her husband from the start, whereas Christiana, Christian’s wife in Bunyan’s work, had to wait for the second book before being allowed to accomplish her own pilgrimage.

### **Allegorical names and the parody of Christianity**

The road companions of Proude and his wife resemble those encountered by Christian. Like Bunyan’s Pliable, Worldly Wiseman, Master Ready to Halt, Master Feebleman, Madam Bubble, Hategood, and Valiant for

Truth, whose names are meant to make the reader identify immediately the features and virtues at work, Vizenor's pilgrims serve as allegories, and, except for two of three of them, never exhibit a developed psychology. They somewhat correspond to the definition of the allegory, which is the art of describing one thing under the image of another. According to Hegel, the first task of allegory consists in personifying and in considering as subjects generalities, or general or abstract properties. Such a subjectivity is never a subject itself for it remains the abstraction of a general representation that is only endowed with the empty shape of subjectivity (Hegel 163). However, if the signified in Vizenor does correspond to the virtues which are traditionally allegorized (life, love, death, cupidity . . .), his signifying subjectivities definitely do not correspond to the classical pattern, nor to the rest of Hegel's definition according to which an allegory is a cold and unadorned production, for Vizenor's pilgrims are resolutely horny and hilarious, and very Chaucerian indeed.

The first companion encountered by the Cedarfair couple is Benito Saint Plumero. The parody of Catholic saints is obvious in this Italian-sounding name and is amplified in the middle of the book by the scene of canonization which transforms the pilgrim into a Double Saint, Saint Benito Saint Plumero (158). Saint Plumero is also named Bigfoot, because of his oversized feet. Vizenor calls him the "phallophore," and one learns that not only does Benito also possess an oversized penis, but he is in love with a statue (81). The parody contained in his name is double: Big Foot is also the English name of the great Chippewa war chief Ma-mong-e-se-da.<sup>2</sup> Such a noble name now designates a clown, a freak, the mixed-blood heir of a bigfooted political exile and explorer, Giacomo Constantino Beltrami. Bigfoot's gigantic penis, so appreciated by female, transsexual, and homosexual partners, is derisively called President Jackson to mock, of course, the archvillain of nineteenth-century federal Indian policy.

The name of Bishop Omax Parasimo, who repeats every word three times and is a specialist of split personalities, reinforces the parody of Catholic names. The Bishop saved Inawa Biwide when the latter was a prisoner in a federal institution. Inawa, in turn, represents the fledgling shaman, the only one allowed to undergo a metamorphosis with Proude in the end. Bunyan would certainly be very amused to see Vizenor attacking the Papists with the same wit Bunyan himself exhibited in various passages of *The Progress*, particularly in the episode of the Valley of the Shadow of Death in which he accuses the Pope and the pagans of having caused the evil at work in the Valley (99-100). Bunyan's denunciation operates with a lower density of flying penises than does Vizenor's, but his description of "the whore of Rome and her merchandise" at Vanity Fair is also nicely evocative of the lust of the great Roman prostitute (125).

One of the various identities of Vizenor's bishop belongs again to the parody of the religious establishment: the metamask of Sister Eternal Flame (179). She resembles more the *Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence* who first appeared in the San Francisco's *Gay Parade* than a traditional nun, and besides, she comes back at the end of *Bearheart* in a scene seemingly taken out of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. With Proude and Inawa already far ahead in New Mexico, Rosina is ambling along with Saint Plumero who has fallen in love with her. Just when she is admiring the sunset from the top of a mission bell tower, he forces her to perform fellatio. Right in the middle of their embrace, which graphically stages everything Hitchcock left unsaid between Kim Novak and James Stewart, Vizenor's nun, Sister Eternal Flame, who is also the transsexual double of Bishop Parasimo, climbs up the steps and out of jealousy strangles her/his beloved Bigfoot (240).

To this multifarious crowd of saints and nuns' coronets is added a pope, the Pilgrim Pope, who will consecrate the canonization of Double Saint once he has accomplished the three required miracles (158). The other pilgrims bear names which are less obviously religious but which are also allegorical and amusing: Proude is of course the proud and good-hearted hero, and his dogs are named Pure Gumption and Private Jones. One of the clowns is called Zebulon Matchi Makwa. He dies after attempting to rescue witches. Pio Wissakodewinini is a "parawoman mixedblood mammoth clown." Accused of raping white women, he was sentenced to "transsexual surgery and freedom on hormones." He (turned she) became the leader of the women's liberation movement until the government crisis prevented the distribution of hormones. She joins the pilgrims in search of a special herb that would give her back her woman's voice and dreams (79, 226, 232). For having taken part in the attempted liberation of witches she is sentenced to death by Inquisitors in a trial reminiscent of those at Salem and at Vanity Fair (*Pilgrim's Progress* 127-34).

Belladonna Darwin-Winter Catcher's name is partly easily explainable and we shall see her story later. Typically it mockingly contains names in three languages: Italian, English (Darwin referring also to the school of thought that condemned the Indians to extinction), and Indian (translated in English). Little Big Mouse, a blue-eyed white beauty and the female double of Little Big Man, is the miniature wife of Sun Bear Sun, "the three hundred pound seven foot son of the utopian tribal organizer Sun Bear" (78). He carries her at his waist and holds her tiny feet in minute stirrups. She will perish, torn to pieces and devoured by cancerous humanoids to whom she offers her erotic frenzy.

Lilith Mae Farrier, the good-hearted teacher, makes love with her dogs after making sure that they wear gloves not to scratch her. Her story is another example of the doubling the author is fond of, since she appears in

another book, *Wordarrows*, in the chapter “Feeding the reservation mongrels,” just as many of his characters come up in various books. Finally, Justice Pardone Cozener, an illiterate lawyer fond of meaningless speeches (and of cozy pardons?), the paragon of the lawyers who make a fortune by pretending to defend the tribes, is in love with Doctor Wilde Coxwaine (“coxcomb,” “cock,” “vane”), a bisexual tribal historian.

Altogether, there are twelve pilgrims or mock apostles under the leadership of Proude. Animals join these human beings, which contrasts with the model of the Christian pilgrimage (though animals are often present in Christian narratives, such as the Saint Francis of Assisi story), and their characterization seems here to belong more to the Native tradition.

### **The Chippewa pilgrimage and human/animal transformations**

The first transformation, the one that sets the pilgrimage going, belongs to the narratives of numerous tribes since it is the transformation of a man into a bear and vice versa. The Chippewa, and Vizenor in particular, are fond of this transformational story. The bear embodies strength and spiritual wisdom, shamanic power. To frighten the federal humanoids coming to fell his cedar trees, Bearheart screams: “ha ha ha ha haaa!” and has them running for their lives. He uses this as a war cry but also as an expression of distress and as what Vizenor likes to call a “trickster signature.” The bear can magically move from one place to another, and when he is overcome by despair Proude turns into a bear and “soars” back to his cedar circus to swim in the lake of the *migis*, the shell that, as Vizenor explains elsewhere, guided the Anishinaabeg from the East to the source of *misissibi*.

The crows that accompany the caravan of the pilgrims belong to many Native American cultures. Like the Chippewa, many Northwest peoples consider the raven, sometimes also the crow, as a trickster, a “deceiver”—to use Levi-Strauss’ term (“un décepteur”), a magician hero. This trickster is often identified in human terms, probably because of its oral prowess, and because of this it is considered as a mediator. There are seven crows in the caravan to show that even the animals participate in the symbolism of numbers, and Vizenor’s seven crows clearly possess mediating qualities. They embody wisdom and warn the pilgrims of incoming dangers without, however, being able to divert those dangers. Towards the end the crows save some of their friends by covering the Inquisition judges with their droppings, but this sacrilege also causes the demise of several pilgrims. This clownish act of desecralization, typical of tribal stories, will be repeated, doubled, in Vizenor’s novel *Griever* when, for the opening of Maxim’s de Beijing, the hero’s rooster “craps” on the immaculate white table cloths.

These farcical episodes can be read as allusions to Chippewa emergence narratives that tell how Naanabozho was going to drown in the waters,

suffocated by his own floating excrement. Vizenor loves to tell this story and joins anality to genitality in *Bearheart*, thereby reproducing the unbridled sexuality of the traditional trickster, whose gigantic penis, often worn over his shoulder, has led the anthropologists and the psychologists of the Radin school to say that such a legend expressed infantile regression. To put an end to the debate, Vizenor strikes at everyone with penises, as a puppet would with a club. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*. The pilgrims' sexuality is not repressed; it is completely liberated and joyous, unlike that of most whites and other evil characters in the novel who only kill and rape, and several pilgrims have to bear the brunt of their violence. One must note that Proude embodies the shaman rather than the trickster in most of the episodes, for his discourse and sexually appears relatively moderate. Of course, he does seduce some female pilgrims, but always more discreetly than his acolytes.

One can also perceive under all the excess of Vizenor's novel a criticism of mass culture, of films in particular, which more and more exploit sex, violence, even cannibalism (as in the recent *Sebastiane* and *Jubilee*). If the pilgrims are lusty, it is never out of cruelty.

### **Double, triple, multiple identities**

Appropriately, most of the instances of identity doubling and splitting occur through sexual or gender transformations. Just as bears or dogs can become men and vice versa, the pilgrims can adopt the identities they invent for themselves in a split second. Vizenor endows his characters with metamasks that metamorphose them completely. It is most of the time the men who adopt transsexualization, while retaining their original sex organs under their garments, which of course comes as a surprise for their partners. However, those metamasks are more effective than simple costumes since with them the pilgrim actually becomes someone else under a different but genuine skin.

Bishop Parasimo has a particular knack for metamasks that allow him to become Sister Eternal Flame or Scintilla Shruggles or Princess Gallroad, who first appear as real characters before he appropriates their personalities according to his whims. Sister Eternal Flame, an "ultra sensitive," lived with fellow nuns in a new age "Scapehouse," which is the first meaningful stopping place on "Callus Road." (These toponyms could of course come straight out of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.) Scintilla Shruggles protects the Lindbergh Museum, second great stop of the book, and is the pretext for another parody, that of a western:

Scintilla Shruggles, a new model pioneer woman and keeper of the Charles Augustus Lindbergh house for the Minnesota Division of Historic sites, leaped from the porch with her thin legs spread, threw her long red hair back over her broad

shoulders and dashed down the lush green bank to the river. She raised the shotgun with one arm, slapped her other hand on her narrow hip, thrust her breastless chest out, and shouted at the tribal pilgrims who had taken cover behind the white pine. (67)

As for Princess Gallroad, she is a pretty hitchhiker encountered in the past by the Gambler. Parasimo lends his metamasks to his companions to complicate the process of identification. The clown Zebulon Matchi Makwa loves turning into Princess Gallroad de Fortuna (who hides a huge penis under his gowns), and he dies under her features after attempting to liberate the witches. Pio Wissakodewinini “metamasks” herself also into Scintilla Shruggles, the amazon of Lindbergh.

Now, what is the function of all these human/animal transformations, these metamasks, these systematic transsexualizations? I do not think Vizenor means us to reflect on the process of donning a mask as a means to unveil the true identity of the self, since, as we saw earlier, his characters are in fact allegories. Rather, he intends his reader to take these changes of identity for what they are, that is to say games of playful invention. Obviously, he enjoys himself when he unrolls before our eyes these comic strips in which everything can be done and undone in a split second and in which spring up characters belonging to our own pantheon, such as the couple Bernadette and Devlin, farmers at Lourdes, Iowa, in one of my favourite passages:

“Lourdes,” said Devlin. “You have brought your lost circus to Lourdes . . . Lourdes, Lourdes, Iowa, place of few virgins now, but the watering is good and clean, never been drunk before from the well.” (99)

The split name of the couple contains both that of the famous Irish Catholic activist and that of her holy namesake from Lourdes, one of the greatest Catholic pilgrimages in the world, famous for the curing water that sprang up for Bernadette on a sign of the Virgin at the foot of the French Pyrénées. At the same time, the description Vizenor gives of Bernadette and Devlin evokes also the archetypal American couple parodied by Grant Wood in his *American Gothic*:

Bernadette and Devlin, the old farm couple living in the house, were awakened by the roar of the engine. The two shuffled to the front of the house on the second floor. . . .

“Mother,” said the old farmer turning from the front window toward his third wife, “have we gone. . . . Have we left this world for the good circus?” . . .

“Shun the devil Devlin. . . . Shun the blackness of the devil Devlin,” warned Bernadette while she drew her knotted

fingers through her hair. (98-99)

When I asked Vizenor how he had come up with such an episode, he explained to me that he had hardly elaborated on reality for there does exist a Lourdes, Iowa, too small to appear on most maps, but which lies at the border with Minnesota, hence precisely on the road of the pilgrims between Saint Paul and Waterloo.

By constructing such episodes, Vizenor is in keeping with the tradition of metamorphoses that aim at amusing the audience. We all know now that Kafka loved mystifying his readers by describing as tragic the metamorphosis of Gregory Samsa when, in fact, he had imagined it as a farce. Similarly, if we think of Chippewa transformations, they do not all have a serious didactic function. In *Bearheart*, many of the doublings and splittings seem gratuitously playful. We must also remember that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is strongly humoristic and that Bunyan cleverly used purely comical episodes to lure his audience into also reading his metaphysical reflections.

In *Bearheart*, too, there is more than meets the eye. Native narratives often recount magic transformations between species and between human beings, or unnatural couplings between a woman and the sun, the wind, or a bear, couplings that will engender mythic beings, stars, or the First People. Vizenor uses the same strategy, but revels in describing these weird creatures minutely, and the very process of these uncommon couplings, which are ordinarily only evoked in stories since only the result matters (the origins of the world, of its creatures), and above all he modernizes them since his pilgrims belong to our modern culture. He thus completely participates in the Native and universal tradition of magical metamorphoses supposed to explain the unexplainable of our human condition.

Proude Cedarfair exemplifies this process best. Apparently an average contemporary civil servant, he can turn into a bear on a whim and must be understood as an avatar of the trickster Naanabozho, and also of *gichimakwa* (see also the name of the clown Zebulon Matchi Makwa), the great bear of the myth who is but the medicine boy who can resurrect the sick and teaches the secrets of the *midewiwin*, the secret society of the Chippewa. He was begotten by an Anishinaabe woman impregnated by the sun on the asking of the *manidoog* (the spirits) to save mankind from diseases and death: "I am a *manidoo* and can take any form I wish, I came on earth to teach you what I was sent among you for" (*Summer in the Spring* 89-92).

The humanoids disfigured by cancers, the Natives and the mixed-bloods decimated by federal agents and encountered by our pilgrims, stand then for humankind whom the *manidoog* wish to save thanks to the intervention of the protean Bear/Boy, of Bear/Bearheart/Proude Cedarfair who shouts like a bear and burns cedarwood to heal the evils of our civilization. This is



where the secret of Vizenor's allegory lies, and to perceive it better I will now analyse three of the major initiatory adventures undergone by the pilgrims: the encounter with the cancer people, the city of Orion, and the episode of the evil Gambler, all of them being trials that can be understood as the doubles of the different circles of Dante's *Commedia*, or of Bunyan's "Slough of Despond," "Vanity Fair," "Valley of the Shadow of Death," "Doubting Castle," etc., even if, of course, the contents of *Bearheart* do not exactly duplicate these adventures.

### **The Valley of the Shadow of Death and the cancer victims**

As we saw earlier, the pilgrimage takes place in a near future when America has run out of fuel. Not only can Americans no longer drive—which implies the loss of their self-definition as "a people always on the move"—but they can no longer work or feed themselves. One can easily spot an environmentalist pamphlet against the frantic consumption of gas and electrical power of American society in this book, which must also be seen as a parodic "road novel." This genre is the typically American version of the pilgrimage, but I think its meaning lies more in the celebration of the feat of moving, in the road as an end in itself, rather than in a journey in search of transcendence, whereas such a search is precisely the aim of traditional pilgrimages which give the material representation of the spiritual quest for truth, redemption, Meaning.

Several amusing episodes show the pilgrims submerged by famished aliens in the car, the mail van, and the boat that they manage to get thanks to their trickster's inventiveness. They must always protect themselves against the cannibalism of skinny whites, in rags, looking like the leprous prisoners of the caves in *Ben Hur*, and we are reminded of Bunyan's description of the Valley of the Shadow of Death: a ditch into which the blind have led the blind, and a lethal quagmire. In "the midst of this Valley" Christian saw the flames of hell and "heard doleful voices" and "a company of fiends coming forward to meet him." The same sight awaits Vizenor's pilgrims, but there will not ensue the salvation that reached Christian through the famous lines from Psalms (23:4) "Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no ill, for thou art with me" (*Pilgrim's Progress* 97-98).<sup>3</sup> The fiends walking toward Proude and his companions are more graphically depicted than Christian's. They are the victims of skin cancer caused by chemicals (145-46, 149). Those horrible freaks wear masks, but now it is not for fun and they are not metamasks since they are transparent and do not hide the blood and ligaments of the cancer victims:

Muscles and flesh twitched and quivered behind the plastic facial features. Eyeballs bulged without skin cover. Teeth

were exposed like those of hideous skeletons. The plastic faces were formed with short clinical smiles. Some plastic faces had small paper stars attached to the cheeks and foreheads. . . . Belladonna looked into the faces of the skin cancer victims and then turned away. She could tell who was smiling and frowning from the combination of muscle movements which were visible beneath the transparent plastic masks. (149)

These unfortunate people cannot shift identities like the pilgrims since they have lost theirs to pollution. The ludic pleasure of metamorphosis can only materialize in a fairly harmonious context.

Vizenor cannot help introducing lust in the horror of the caravan, and by doing so, he starts eliminating the pilgrims who seem not to have understood the meaning of life. Little Big Mouse, for one, finds the monsters marvellous, and she falls for the “scolomia moths” marching with the cancer patients (147). She wants to steal their translucent wings and teases them so that they finally attack her. Soon she transfers her erotic lust onto the cancer freaks: ““Do you love us as we are without balls and elbows?” chanted a clutch of male cripples while Little Big Mouse danced for them” (150). She falls into a trance: “Their energies aroused her visual fantasies of animal lust.” She then undertakes a strip tease number and they fall on her to skin her: “They carried with them parts of her never known to their own imperfect bodies” (151). The chapter ends on this. Is she punished because she naively found “beautiful” these horrible creatures, the fiends of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and has not obeyed, out of lust, her companions who tried to hold her back? Must she be seen as the good-hearted victim of the lust of these deformed beings bent on evil because of the cupidity of capitalist society? Here again the meaning is double, or even multiple.

### **Vanity Fair at Orion**

Little Big Mouse’s fate resembles that of Belladonna Darwin Winter Catcher. I shall not look into the circumstances of her birth but focus instead on a key episode of the book, the polysemic stop-over at Orion. The pilgrims reach the fortified city of Orion (Vizenor assured me it actually existed where he situates it) and ask to be let in:

Orion was framed in a great wall of red earthen bricks. Behind the earthen wall the blades of seventeen windmills named for the states rattled like strident insects on the hot wind over the panhandle . . . the metal portcullis and several guards in collegiate band uniforms escorted the pilgrims through the red wall. (189-190)

Such a description has led Hartwig Isernhagen to write that the fortified city of Orion stood for the White establishment, the prison erected by the dominant society, the castle that Vine Deloria opposes to the tipi, which would be further proved by the fact that its inhabitants are hunters preoccupied by the purity of their race. According to Isernhagen: "The fantastic topography realizes a number of topics by allusion, in part difficult, in part (I trust) so hermetic that we fail to 'get' it, and always indirect and playful, rather than direct and 'serious'" (Isernhagen 248). Such a comment is definitely in keeping with the Vizenorian mode of delaying meaning. However, such an interpretation of Orion is, I think, univocal, and the text itself shows that in spite of its *looking like* a W.A.S.P. fortress in the middle of an apocalyptic age, Orion stands also, and above all, for universal wisdom, with its hunters representing not fascists but monks who are the keepers of a knowledge otherwise long lost.

What are the signs that allow for such an interpretation? First, the fact that Vizenor has chosen to eliminate in Orion the pilgrim who has completely misunderstood Indianness, Belladonna, whose name reveals her double nature: it means "beautiful woman" in Italian and is the name of a pretty but poisonous flower, the deadly nightshade. *Bearheart's* Belladonna is beautiful and seductive and venomous, even if she has extenuating circumstances due to her being born a mixedblood at Wounded Knee (189).

The hunters of Orion (the name of which comes from the hunter killed by Artemis and turned into a constellation, and could thus imply that the city contains the essence of Western culture) embody wisdom and evoke the perfect hunters of Vizenor's *Wordarrows*. In exchange for their hospitality and the excellent meal they offer to the pilgrims, they demand a story from the best storyteller of the group. Over-proud Belladonna offers her voice. She then pronounces an extremely long statement on Indianness, a standard speech that could be pronounced by many a pseudo-Native activist, and echoes the speech of the fake Indian warrior of the Letter to the Reader. She recites her creed on *Mother Earth*:

Our bodies are connected to mother earth and our minds are part of the clouds. . . . Our voices are the living breath of the wilderness. . . . I am different from a whitewoman because of my values and my blood is different. . . . I would not be white.  
(194)

These are precisely the worn-out clichés that Vizenor attacks repeatedly throughout the novel and which he calls "terminal creeds," and instead of caricaturing the hunters-breeders, as some would have it, he turns them into his spokesmen. One of them retorts to Belladonna: "Are you telling me that what you are saying is exclusive to your mixedblood race?" And a fellow

hunter continues his questioning: “What does Indian mean?” to which Belladonna, outraged, replies: “Are you so hostile that you cannot figure out what and who Indians are? An Indian is a member of a recognized tribe and a person who has Indian blood.” This is of course the official definition. And the hunter answers back with the Vizenorian sentence *par excellence*:

Indians are an invention. . . . 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. (194-95)

Two other little signs confirm to the reader that the old men are but avatars of the trickster: one of them scratches his ear (“He touched his ear with his curled trigger finger” [193]), a gesture that will characterize most of Vizenor’s tricksters in his later books, and the other has a red beard and looks like one of Snow White’s dwarves (195). One of the Orion ladies fittingly declares: “You speak from terminal creeds, not a person of real experience and critical substance” (196).

To thank her for her pretty story the old men offer Belladonna cookies, poisoned of course as in fairy tales: “Bring the cookies for the speaker of dreams,” the banker announces, so that the feast can begin: “Terminal creeds are terminal diseases and when death is inevitable celebration is the best expression” (197). Vizenor’s narrator concludes: “The poison cookie was the special dessert for narcissists and believers in terminal creeds. She was her own victim” (199). When the caravan resumes its journey, Belladonna dies chanting beautiful thoughts on the advantages of climbing hills backwards. Going backwards is again a typically tricksterian way of moving, and the hills remind us of those Christian must climb in his Progress. Double Saint can only approve *à la* Lewis Carroll: “Another nice thing about walking backwards . . . is that when you fall you fall on your ass and not on your face. Ass falling is a lot less embarrassing” (200-01).

The interpretation I offer seems not so much to annul the first—Orion representing the W.A.S.P. fortress—as to double it. For in fact, until this very episode, almost all the villains encountered on the road including the federal civil servants who were responsible for the Apocalypse were white, which was rather simplistically dualistic. It is at this point that the rules of the game seem to change. At Orion suddenly, the only ones able to read the signs are the white hunters and their wives. This episode reappears almost identically in *Earthdivers*, under the title “Terminal Creeds,” which would tend to show the importance Vizenor attaches to its meaning.

Furthermore, Belladonna clearly resembles the creatures of darkness that Christian encounters in Vanity Fair. The biblical source of this passage

of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is Ecclesiastes, with its famous opening and leitmotiv: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (1:2). And it is interesting to see that Belladonna corresponds perfectly to the description of the self-righteous fool criticized by the Preacher for provoking his/her own damnation: "Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise; why shouldest thou destroy thyself" (7:16). Or again further: "The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself" (10:12).

Fittingly, the biblical Preacher gives the parable of the little city besieged by a great king, but which was redeemed by a "poor wise man." Orion could well be this little city with its Great Wall duplicating the biblical "great bulwarks" of the attacking king, and with its hunters whose power derives only from words, for saith the Preacher:

The words of wise *men are* heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools.  
Wisdom *is* better than weapons of war; but one sinner destroyeth much good. (9:17-18)

Proude obviously belongs among the wise men since he does not take part in the foolish speech competition. He will only speak once Belladonna has died in order to bury her according to the proper ritual. To everyone's surprise, he will split her belly open to remove the corpses of twin fetuses, the product of a rape, in order to endow each with a sacred name. The pilgrims sing and bury the three of them (207). Here again the episode is polysemic. Belladonna is her own victim, but she has also been previously the victim of a rape. The duality of meaning is expressed in the twinhood of the fetuses. Twins belong to many Native and non-Native myths, usually to signify the complementary duality of human nature and of the Creation. Belladonna, like Little Big Mouse, belongs to the people Proude, the bear/shaman, is not able to save or redeem. And yet, he had almost won when he had triumphed over the Gambler.

### **Doubting Castle and Giant Despair as the evil Gambler**

The encounter with Sir Cecil Staples occurs towards the middle of the book and is of paramount importance. His sign announces:

The Monarch of Unleaded Gasoline  
Living or dying for gasoline,  
gamble for five gallons  
New traps and old tortures  
follow the rows of abandoned cars to the altar trailers  
open for evil business (103)

Traditional or classic tales of initiation include a fight with a superhuman

being: an ogre, a witch, a giant such as the evil one Christian has to face in Doubting Castle, a beast such as the lion threatening Christiana, or a strange character like the Gambler who challenges Naanabozho for the immortality of human beings in Chippewa lore. The reader immediately recognizes the latter here under the character of the Monarch of Unleaded Gasoline, since Gasoline is the new Deity of the Americans, a matter of life or death for them. Amusingly, the one he sells is unleaded, a detail that mocks the environmentalist craze of the seventies.

According to the Chippewa, the trickster could rescue his friends, the people, by winning the game which consisted of setting up four figures (one for each direction) on a dish, shaking the dish, and having the figures still standing erect, in a game similar to the always symbolically rich chess game, such as the one Ingmar Bergman uses in *The Seventh Seal*. Nobody has so far succeeded against the Monarch of Gasoline. His victims, who have accepted the conditions he imposes, must then perish under horrible tortures, and Vizenor's imagination reaches into the most sordid devices. Lilith Mae agrees to play the game in order to obtain the gasoline needed to rescue the caravan. She loses and must perish. As befits the valiant knight he is supposed to be, Proude challenges the Gambler in his turn. As expected, since Proude is an incarnation of Naanabozho, he wins, but his generosity does not extend to the executioner who beseeches him to spare him. The monarch will die from the contraptions he had devised for his own victims. Proude places a neckscrew on the Monarch's neck with a timer, set for nineteen minutes, and leaves. The neckband tightens and cuts through the throat of the Gambler. Proude throws the choker key at him, but far enough to keep him from grabbing it (138).

The key belongs to the stock devices of all Gothic stories, but the insistence on its being "the good key on the road" (138) can also be interpreted as a reference to the one Christian finally finds at Doubting Castle where he has been imprisoned with Hopeful by Giant Despair. The evil Giant, under the advice of his nasty wife Diffidence, has beaten them almost to death and is trying to force them to commit suicide. Here again, it is a matter of life and death, of immortality. The key, called promise, that Christian suddenly remembers carrying in his bosom, opens all the doors of the dungeon, so that they can freely pursue their quest for spiritual freedom (151-57).

Moreover, if the Monarch of Gasoline's development reproduces the classical pattern of the Chippewa myth, Vizenor adds his own contraption to it so that the construction is again doubled. He has the Gambler narrate his own life and explain how he plunged into such sadism. In fact, his evil power is far inferior to that of the federal government that kills while remaining indifferent, for the Gambler is friendly and fascinated by his

partners/victims. He coldly analyzes the sources of evil and comes out a philosopher. He had originally been kidnapped in a supermarket by a woman whom he would later call Mother. She used to drive her thirteen stolen children in her trailer all around the states (in another mock road novel within the major one, or a ludicrous *mise en abyme* of the pilgrimage). Like the pilgrims of the caravan, the children learned to love one another: "We learned that biological families are not the center of meaning and identities." The mother had taken to kidnapping children because the "federal reform program" had deprived her of her own three kids on the grounds that she was unmarried. "All she wanted was a family" (125). She then gave lifts to hitchhikers, and this was how the Gambler met Princess Gallroad, who later became the metamask of the Bishop. Little by little the children began to enjoy torturing their passagers. Like Hitler, the Gambler loves music, and above all he considers his role as indispensable for the harmony of the world to be maintained: "No struggle between good and evil when the good power has failed." And he confesses that now: "I am less interested in perfection . . . less interested in death but I still find good times in balancing the world with evil" (126-27).

I will base my conclusion on this episode which is doubly central, because of its situation in the book and because of its meaning.

### Conclusion

What is the aim of this literary game of echoes on various pilgrimage strategies? Vizenor is fond of this type of wandering, whether metaphysical or more simply picaresque, since he resumed the experiment in 1987 with his second novel *Griever: An American Monkey King In China*, which borrows also the structure of one of the greatest pilgrimage narratives in the world, that of the Chinese *Journey to the West*.<sup>4</sup> He later used it again in *The Trickster of Liberty*, and in fact, all of his books show his characters on the move. The pilgrimage appears as the perfect didactic strategy, for it reproduces the road of life, the initiatory trials that we all necessarily face, the discovery of knowledge.

Undoubtedly Vizenor was first influenced by the structure of many Chippewa stories which relate the peripatetic tribulations of various characters and above all of Naanabozho. But he must also have been influenced by the itinerary of his own life, which was a series of dramatic separations, adoptions, and difficult journeys. He could survive them only because he could represent them intellectually; he could reconstruct them as the tribulations of the trickster, as we can guess from his staging of himself in his autobiography *Interior Landscapes*.<sup>5</sup>

But why structure these wanderings after the pilgrimages of foreign literary traditions? I think it is a deliberate game on the part of Vizenor, who

has read immensely. It is an intellectual game of intercultural comings and goings, to see how all the classical initiatory narratives coincide, to see how he can appropriate them to send his own message while eliciting in his reader the same pleasure from this intertextual game which consists in looking for the similarities and the differences. In 1978, with his first major book, Vizenor leaps into post-modern literature, in a spontaneous manner since he considers that such a mode has always existed in Native oral traditions.

Furthermore, I think that by taking as a canvas the most famous book of the Protestant world after the Bible—*The Pilgrim's Progress*—Vizenor shows to what extent he diverges from but also accepts as his own some of the values of the West.

Vizenor's criticism of the Puritan way of thinking, exhibited in his parody of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, could be that it is unreasonable to try to eradicate evil in a monomaniacal quest for the good. Christian and his friends set on a quest for the essence of perfection, of Christianity. Vizenor, and Native spiritualities in general, recognize the existence of evil, but they recognize that evil is inseparable from good, and that one cannot and must not try to destroy one half of the whole. The Gambler's speeches make this clear: one must find balance. Of course, such a perspective on the duality of the Creation and of human nature also exists in Euramerican thought, and Goethe, for one, explained in his *Faust* how evil necessarily coexists with good, just as the daylight cannot exist without the night, but this sort of European philosophy never circulated in the mission schools, unlike *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the introduction to my edition of Bunyan fittingly explains that: "it has been read by cultivated Moslems, and at the same time in cheap missionary editions by American Indians and South Sea Islanders" (7). The strategy of the double, of the multiple, allows Vizenor to transcend the reductive dualism of the most commonly known version of Western thought in America by staging his own version of a play on reality and protean illusion.

Because of the profundity of Vizenor's apparently exclusively light-hearted game on words, I would disagree with what Velie says in his *Four American Indian Literary Masters* about the lack of "philosophical and aesthetic depth" of *Bearheart*. I agree with the proposition that "in contrast to writers like Momaday, who makes heavy use of symbolism, novelists like Vizenor eschew it completely," though I would rather say that Vizenor does not so much eschew symbolism as pepper his works a little with it in order to parody it more effectively. I do not think, however, that for him "the surface is the meaning" and that "there is nothing between the lines but white space, as Barthelme says" (Velie 136-37). The meaning in this novel as in



*Griever*, for one, springs up from between the lines, from the distance Vizenor places or refuses to place between a classical model and the mode of adaptation he chooses, and clearly this is not what one can call a surface meaning exclusively. This sends us back to what Vizenor says about his living on the margins, like his trickster: the meaning lies in-between, in the contrast between the two lines of print, between two cultures, which have here produced two divergent yet in many ways comparable pilgrimages.

Another point of divergence and resemblance lies in the title chosen by Vizenor, "Cultural Word Wars." One can note here the insistence on the Word, and in *Bearheart* this seems to imply the oral word, whereas in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, even if everything is a dialogue centered around the Word, it is said that Christian follows the Book, the Scripture, the written word. And one can feel in *Bearheart* a condemnation of the race that has imposed writing, holy or not, on the Native peoples. This a great Vizenorian theme. Yet, is there not some contradiction in the subtitle of the novel, "The Heirship Chronicles," since chronicles are by definition chronological records, hence linear and "written" most of the time? And the end product of these word wars is a printed book, just like Bunyan's.<sup>6</sup>

At last, to end on the resorption of duality through harmony, I think that Vizenor's fondness for Bunyan is perhaps more profound than his irony directed against Bunyan. After all, does Vizenor not deride more openly the Catholics than the Protestants in this novel, in spite of the fact that the Catholics have never shared the obsession of the Puritans for evil? The world of Proude (*Bearheart*) is in reality very close to Christian's. The pretext for the two pilgrimages happens to be a profound civilization crisis, and both unfold in a world in anomie, which results from the loss of the spiritual values of the West. Only pure and generous Christianity, Bunyan tells us—only a pure and generous humorous spirituality, Vizenor tells us—will be able to beget a new harmonious world order. The narrative pattern of the books is similar since the historical circumstances are similar: harmony, destruction of this harmony out of cupidity, nastiness, then destruction of the world itself, persecutions of the pure/puritan ones, famines, diseases. But at the end of the cycle, there is the hope of rebirth for some, the hope of a new emergence. This is plain in the two books, for the cyclical structure is perceivable in Bunyan too, in spite of the accusation often pronounced by today's Native intellectuals who, in order to counter the one often levelled against their own culture, declare that the Christian world only knows a linear type of history, fit for "chronicles."

Beyond the lustful and ludic fancies of its narrative mode, *Bearheart* can be read as a twin brother, engendered in a "love and hate" copulation, as the Chippewa double of the Anglo-Saxon classic produced by Bunyan who was in his own day refusing the colonization of minds imposed by the English

Crown. Little did Bunyan know at the time (though he must have prayed for some recognition) that his own book would later be used by the same Crown, with a somewhat different head underneath it, to colonize Natives around the world. Does Vizenor really hold a grudge against him for that? It is doubtful, since he has shown so much humorous empathy for the plight of Christian. Yet, by producing this *Native Pilgrim's Progress*, a manifesto which is his own version of the canonical novel written according to the Bible, by tossing it upside down, by hiding wisdom under the most foolish of attitudes, Vizenor is asserting the spiritual freedom of his tribal people, even after their political power has been smothered by generations of colonists brandishing the Bible and poor Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>This is a revised and expanded version of a paper first given during the annual conference of the Centre de Recherches sur l'Amérique Anglophone at the Université Michel de Montaigne-Bordeaux III which for the past ten years has focused on North American multicultural literatures. The topic for the November 1995 seminar was "Figures du Double dans la littérature américaine" and the French title of my paper was: "*Bearheart* de Gerald Vizenor: le pèlerinage et son double ou Bunyan *revisited*" (Annales du CRAA. Bordeaux: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine, 1996, 143-160).

<sup>2</sup>See Warren 52, 195, 218-220, 243, 248.

<sup>3</sup>This biblical verse is so well-known in Anglo-Saxon countries that, in another game of echoes between the Protestant and Native American classics on the one hand, and between the latter themselves on the other, Louis Owens also has one of his major characters of *The Sharpest Sight* wear the beginning of the sentence on his jacket (54). As to the title of this novel itself, Owens borrowed it from another great Calvinist, Jonathan Edwards.

<sup>4</sup>I analyze the correspondences between the two texts in "Vizenor's *Griever*, a Little Red Post-Maodernist Book of Cocks, Tricksters and Colonists."

<sup>5</sup>This book is very important to understanding how far the belief in metamorphosis can go in Vizenor's fiction and non-fiction, the line separating the two types of literature being always extremely thin for him. Interestingly, the bear transformation so developed in *Bearheart* is also used by Momaday to stage himself, but the process of identification with a mythic character (whether a bear or a trickster) evolves rather differently for the two writers as I tried to show in "Analyse de deux mises en scène interculturelles du sujet: les pactes autobiographiques de Momaday

dans *The Names* et de Vizenor dans *Interior Landscapes*.”

<sup>6</sup>This is another topic that I address in an article on Vizenor’s *The People Named the Chippewa*: “Naanabozho contre Chronos ou les ambiguïtés de l’histoire chez Vizenor.”

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## *Legal and Tribal Identity in Gerald Vizenor's The Heirs of Columbus*

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Stephen D. Osborne

Reading Gerald Vizenor is tricky—and he wouldn't have it any other way. His fiction, while clearly inspired and grounded in the tribal traditions of his Anishinaabe people, is at the same time avowedly and aggressively postmodern. A “compassionate trickster,” as LaVonne Ruoff has described him (36), or, in Thomas King's delightful formulation, “Coyote with a word processor” (Hochbruck 278), Vizenor is a word warrior employing every discursive weapon he can to undermine and overturn the assumptions that he feels are used to colonize and delimit the possibilities of tribal identity in the contemporary world. The tribal must not be defined, and confined, as anthropologists have done: that is, as discrete, static sets of artifacts and traditions obsolete in the (post)modern world despite their nostalgic appeal. Instead, Vizenor asserts the affinity of tribal and postmodern ways of knowing and speaking. In a society largely indifferent when not overtly hostile to both sets of “tribes”—Indian and postmodern—Vizenor certainly has his critics. Much of the criticism derives, I believe, from a misunderstanding of Vizenor's fictional technique and a consequent confusion over his notion of what constitutes “tribal” identity. Critics have applied to his work a mimetic representational standard, and a corresponding model of identity, which Vizenor attacks as not only naive but positively dangerous to tribal survival. I will argue, however, that for all its theoretical sophistication, Vizenor's fiction is very much in the tradition of both the Anishinaabe trickster and more obviously “tradition”-honoring writers like Momaday and Silko.<sup>1</sup>

Disdaining the myth of cultural purity that underwrites the colonialist

dialectics of opposition and assimilation, accommodation and resistance (Moore 9-10), Vizenor's work suggests multiple modes of encountering, of engaging, of appropriating "dominant" cultural forms and narratives. In his novel *The Heirs of Columbus*, the dominant cultural forms he "works over" are history and law. Vizenor revises the defining cultural narrative of heroic discovery and conquest symbolized by Columbus *but also* the tragic "oppositional" narrative spun by more recent liberal historians. Similarly, Vizenor subjects Anglo-American law to satirical critique, but that law is not to be simply negated or resisted; it's to be toyed with, in a serious sense, to be "signified on." In both cases, Vizenor asserts the liberatory potential as well as the oppressive reality of these institutions by engaging them neither as victim nor conqueror, but as trickster. In what sense, though, is Vizenor's fiction "tribal"? Can the trickster operate outside the specific traditions of tribes and become in addition, as Henry Louis Gates says of the Signifying Monkey, "the trope of literary revision itself" (44)?

Vizenor is often criticized for the abstraction of his language and, it would seem, his politics. His comic fiction "obscures tribal codings or cultural groundings" (Lincoln 162); his essays sacrifice "genuine utility" in favor of "the trendy and culturally totalizing abstractions of postmodernism" (Churchill, "Manifest" 315, 318). A good example might seem to be Vizenor's use of the term "tribal," which he loses from reference to any specific tribe.<sup>2</sup> Is Vizenor denying the distinctiveness and diversity of the over 500 tribes in the United States alone? Of course not. First, he poses "the tribal" in polemical counterpoint to the "culture of dominance," as the philosophical and physical antidote to "the curse of a chemical civilization" (*Heirs* 170). Second, "the tribal" is slippery; it cannot be fixed (and thus killed) as some reified cultural essence. "Tribal" is a noun at times, but one fighting its "thingness" or noun-itude in favor of a constellation (or "figuration," in Vizenor's terms) of living, changing relationships or tropes. More often "tribal" appears as an adjective, attaching to itself various qualities, multiplying its significance rather than refining its identity. The trickster, like the postmodernist, is a bricoleur.

Since it is not a person, place, or thing, the tribal is not essentially regional. The titular protagonists of *The Heirs of Columbus* move from Anishinaabe country at the headwaters of the Mississippi to the international waters between Point Roberts, in Washington state, and Canada, establishing a liminal space for themselves on the margins of existing geographical and cultural regions. In Vizenor's *Dead Voices* the tribal shaman Bagese resides in Oakland, but through her shape-shifting inhabits the tribal worlds of fleas, crows, bears and others. The "circus pilgrims" of *Bearheart* wander all over Creation (or Destruction). In each case, though, tribal peoples bring along their "stories in the blood," the true source of their identities. Again,

Vizenor would hardly deny the importance of a land base to actual tribes, a land base composed of traditional homelands. But land can be stolen, and people can move or be forced away from home. If the tribal consists in stories, in communal narrative traditions, it is safer (never safe) from the windigoos, the ersatz “invented Indians,” and the federal agents of the world.

If at the thematic level Vizenor counters the stereotype of the static primitive tribe, at the stylistic level he challenges some newer stereotypes of American Indian authors. In the spirit of Vizenor’s playful penchant for neologisms, I will characterize his work as vagant, as in extravagant. Long before postmodernism, Thoreau aspired to this stylistic ideal, yet worried that he had fallen short. In *Walden* he wrote,

I chiefly fear lest my expression may not be extra-vagant enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. *Extra vagance!* it depends on how you are yarded. (215)

Thoreau figures himself as a vagabond, from the Latin *vagus* (wandering). He also invokes the obsolete sense of “vagary” as a departure from the regular, lawful, or proper course of conduct. Vizenor’s trickster fiction thematizes and enacts this kind of vagance, transgressing conventional discursive boundaries while reconfiguring those imposed on tribal cultures. So much for the postmodern (or at least the transcendental) aspect of Vizenor, a critic might respond, but is not vagance the very opposite of the tribal? Tribes are *rooted*, geographically and culturally, oriented toward enduring, revered traditions rather than continuous vertiginous change. Has Vizenor sacrificed any vestige of the tribal in his quest for innovation? Have his postmodern polemics, at the very least, overshadowed their tribal groundings? The answer—no—is to be found in the intersection of his polemical method and his model of epistemology. The vagant trickster is both emblematic of tribal “survivance” and directly opposed to the “terminal creeds” of Western institutions, including the legal system.

One powerful force defining and delimiting tribal cultures is the legal system of what Vizenor calls “the culture of ownership” (*Heirs* 77). The twin foundations of Anglo-American law are identity and property, the two being linked in that identity *is* property, that which is “proper” to oneself. The trickster, on the other hand, represents alterity, in the Derridean sense of the (unacknowledged) condition of differential relations that enables the fictional construction of identity. While the law, and the judge, seek to *settle* matters, to fix identities and close narratives through material evidence, the trickster works to *unsettle* them, to decolonize the narrative terrain and resist

closure. In Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*, it is not the Great Discoverer who is on trial, but the grounds of judgment that underwrite the emplotment of his story as either romantic triumph or tragic catastrophe. A key scene in the novel also raises more concrete issues—the rights of tribal remains and artifacts to legal standing, what it is that constitutes tribal identity—while providing a paradigmatic instance of Vizenor's carnivalesque style. Before turning to the novel, I want to frame the discussion with some brief reflections on the connection of Vizenor's work to that of other American Indian authors, in order to suggest that it is not so eccentric or idiosyncratic as it might appear.

If there is one accepted truism about contemporary Native American literatures, it is the central importance they attach to place. In the classic texts of Momaday, Silko, and others, culture and language are anchored in a particular landscape, a kind of mythic topography ceremonially configured. The narratives themselves describe and enact ceremonies whose purpose, as Paula Gunn Allen describes it, is “to integrate: to fuse the individual with . . . the community” (10), a community broadly conceived to include not only humans but animals and even the “inanimate” objects of nature. William Bevis has described this characteristic movement as “homing in,” which he contrasts with the individualistic “lighting out” of Euro-American stories. In the words of N. Scott Momaday, “The events of one's life take place, *take place*. . . . Events do indeed take place; they have meaning in relation to the things around them” (*Names* 142).

But these places and things can—must, inevitably—change. The place referred to by Momaday in the passage just cited is Jemez Pueblo, far from the lands of his Kiowa ancestors. “It was not our native world,” he points out later, “but we appropriated it, as it were, to ourselves” (*Names* 152). In his well-known essay on “Native American Attitudes Toward the Environment,” Momaday elaborates on his concept of “appropriation,” by which he means establishing and maintaining proper or appropriate relations between humans and the land.

[T]he native American ethic with respect to the [physical world] is a matter of reciprocal appropriation; appropriations in which man invests himself in the landscape, and at the same time incorporates the landscape into his own most fundamental experience. . . . This appropriation is primarily a matter of the imagination. (80)

The tacit contrast is to Western *material* appropriation (and incorporation) of the land. Momaday invokes appropriation in its archaic sense of “to make suitable”; he describes “appropriate” relations of harmony, of “alignment” (84-85), of mutual accommodation and adjustment, as opposed



to the Western tradition of “dominion” from *Genesis* through John Locke to Frederick Jackson Turner.

Momaday’s formulation, I will argue, is much more useful in understanding Vizenor’s fictional strategy than Bevis’s metanarrative of “homing in,” or even Allen’s important articulation of literature and ceremony in traditional tribal cultures. Even so, for each of the writers just cited, to speak of regional tribal literatures would be redundant, as if there could be a “universal” tribal identity and discourse. As he does with so many assumptions, however, Vizenor challenges this consensus, asserting the liberatory potential of what he calls “universal tribal identities” (*Heirs* 157) to break down the “racial separations” that plague modern—and modernist—societies today. By no means does Vizenor deny or erase cultural differences in the postmodern extravagance of his fiction. Nor is his argument assimilationist; his primary concern is the continuing vitality (or “survivance” in his coinage) of the tribal traditions (especially his own) embodied in stories. His distinctiveness is less a matter of purpose than of strategy. If the force of much Native American fiction is centripetal, as authors and protagonists “home in” on tribal traditions (always adapting and evolving to be sure), the force of Vizenor’s is centrifugal, as the tribal world journeys out to encompass (one might say to colonize) those elements of the nontribal world congruent with its fundamental values and useful to its continuance. At both thematic and stylistic levels, Vizenor’s fiction illustrates Momaday’s “appropriation” to and of the postmodern cultural landscape.

Not everyone will assent to the value of such a project (nor, likely, to my description of it), but at the very least it raises provocative questions about regionalism and identity in Native American literature. Can regions be bounded not geographically, but discursively? Does it make sense to speak of a virtual region, an imaginative borderland encompassing both tribal and postmodern realms? If so, what material utility might there be in exploring and mapping such a region? The purpose here is less to answer these questions than to suggest how and why Vizenor poses them. My central example, the court hearing scene from the 1991 novel *The Heirs of Columbus*, I take as paradigmatic of Vizenor’s writing in its satirical critique of the “manifest manners” and institutions of dominance and in its utopian assertion of the power of resistance embodied—or rather inscribed—in the traditional figure of the trickster.

Vizenor embraces the interpenetration of tribal traditions and modern technologies, including those of literary production and analysis. His literary mission, one might say, is to introduce Coyote to the new discursive terrain of postmodernism, on the assumption that the trickster will feel right at home in the “language games” which have all-too-serious stakes. The essence of the trickster, for Vizenor, is his transformative healing power, which

manifests itself in his comic resistance to the tragic “terminal creeds” of Western civilization. Tragedy forecloses possibility; comedy liberates and enables “survivance.”

One might think that Christopher Columbus, who initiated the epidemical and genocidal decimation of so many tribes in the New World, would be the quintessential sign of tribal tragedy. But in typically unpredictable trickster fashion, in the midst of worldwide handwringing over the quincentenary of Columbus’s “discovery,” Vizenor published *The Heirs of Columbus* in 1991, a novel whose “trick” is nothing less than emplotting the American holocaust itself as comic. Assimilating the lauded mariner into tribal tradition, in a reversal of the standard historical narrative, Vizenor celebrates Columbus as a kind of wayward Coyote, a tormented crossblood trickster (he’s Mayan on his mother’s side, and also seems to have some affiliation with the “tribe” of Sephardic Jews). Although he brings untold destruction, Columbus also fathers (literally and figuratively) a truly New World, a mongrel hemisphere. (“Mongrel” is by no means a pejorative term in Vizenor’s lexicon; instead it signifies an energizing admixture of “stories in the blood,” and often indicates powers of transformation or discernment denied to thoroughbreds.) One might say that Vizenor’s novel is a post-modern tribal trickster cycle that stands Columbus on his head as a way of welcoming him back into the tribe.

Columbus arises in tribal stories that heal with humor the world he wounded; he is loathed, but he is not a separation in tribal consciousness. The Admiral of the Ocean Sea is a trickster overturned in his own stories five centuries later. (*Heirs* 185)

In his first voyage to the New World, it turns out, Columbus sired a tribal family line that finds itself, 500 years later, at the headwaters of the Mississippi in Minnesota. These are the heirs of Columbus:

Binn Columbus and her son Stone; Memphis, the black panther; Gracioso Browne, the panic hole historian; Felipa Flowers, the gorgeous trickster poacher; Caliban, the great white mongrel; Samana, the shaman bear from Big Island in Lake of the Woods. Miigis, the luminous child, and Admire, the healer who whistled with a blue tongue . . . (14)

Vizenor makes no attempt to develop these characters much beyond their linguistic labels. Though they are certainly distinctive, they are not really individuals in the traditional sense. There are no interior life, no psychic tension, no inner voyages of discovery and exploration of the kind we have been taught to look for in traditional novels. Postmodernism, like tribalism, Vizenor suggests, denies an interior identity separate from the surface play

of language—or denies the psycho-archaeological surface-depth metaphor altogether. The characters are personae rather than persons, masks representing various aspects of a composite tribal character rather than individual presences. As Truman Columbus, “the shouter,” shouts, “We are created in stories, the same stories that hold our memories and thousands of generations in these stones” (14).

Just as Columbus and his heirs are created in stories, so too the trickster, who in Vizenor’s formulation is not a figure in the traditional sense but a *figuration*, a series of figures or tropes, a composite effect of language in a narrative tradition. As Vizenor explains in “A Postmodern Introduction” to the critical collection *Narrative Chance*,

The trickster is a communal sign in a comic narrative; the comic *holotrope* (the whole figuration) is a consonance in tribal discourse. (*Chance* 9)

In part, Vizenor’s construction of character invokes the psychoanalytic tradition from Freud through Lacan (whom Vizenor is fond of quoting in his essays): identity is structured in and as language; we are the stories we tell about ourselves. Perhaps this notion of identity is not so different from Momaday’s in his “Man Made of Words.” The words are different, to be sure, but the underlying insight—whether we label it tribal or postmodern—is the same:

. . . that in a certain sense we are all made of words; that our most essential being consists in language. It is the element in which we think and dream and act, in which we live our daily lives. There is no way in which we can exist apart from the morality of a verbal dimension. (162)

In *The Heirs of Columbus*, the moral dimension of our existence-in-language becomes clear when tribal stories are plundered by outsiders, threatening the very existence of the tribe. As Truman “the shouter” emphasizes, these stories, the essence of tribal identity for Vizenor, are cultural property, not individually owned. On this point turns the plot of *The Heirs of Columbus*. In brief, the heirs learn that the remains of their European-Mayan ancestor are being held, along with stolen medicine pouches, in a vault at the Conquistador Club of the Brotherhood of American Explorers in New York. Felipa Flowers, the trickster poacher dedicated to the repatriation of tribal remains and artifacts, is dispatched to negotiate with the owner, the shadowy, pseudo-tribal Doric Miched, whom she informs, “The medicine pouches are tribal stories, not capital assets” (46). With the help of a nerdy urban shaman named Transom, she magically steals the pouches and the remains of Columbus. Miched files charges of “ritual crime” against Felipa and the heirs, and the ensuing hearing becomes a

carnavalesque confrontation of tribal stories and the competing narratives of Anglo-American law.

A series of trickster witnesses takes the stand to present relentlessly irrelevant and immaterial testimony, precisely to call into question the standards of relevance and materiality assumed by the legal system predicated on possessive individualism. The motto of Miched's Conquistador Club, "never retreat from the ownership of land and language" (50), is endorsed by the legal "culture of ownership" (77) legitimizing the appropriation (here in Locke's sense, not Momaday's) of tribal stories. As Lappet Browne points out, "The rules of a legal culture rule out tribal stories and abolish chance in favor of causative binaries" (82). In other words, law's purpose is to *settle* things, to codify and arbitrate (but within a framework of accepted premises and acceptable outcomes), while the trickster's is to *unsettle* things, to highlight their arbitrary and contingent nature. But it would be a mistake to see the two figures as opposites. Like Derrida's alterity, which is not the opposite of identity but the fundamental condition of its construction, the trickster does not so much oppose the arbiter as compel acknowledgement of the essentially arbitrary nature of his operations.

Why is it, for example, that some non-sentient beings, like corporations and universities, have legal standing and may be represented in court, while others—trees, tribal remains (bones), and the stories they embody—may not? Recognizing the arbitrary nature of legal distinctions such as this opens the door to the arbitration that is the essence of the trickster's cultural work. The liberatory potential in the legal process lies in the fact that it, like tribal cultures, is essentially narrative. It is open to constructive, as well as destructive, fictions; if a corporation can act like a person, can bring suit, there is no logical reason why bones and trees could not. Vizenor knows well enough that law is created and implicated in economic and political as well as logical systems. Trees lack legal standing not because they are insensate, but so that they can be exploited. Tribal remains are exploited legally because of the power of the academy, the prestige of science, and the denigration of tribal ways of knowing to the realm of "superstition." Vizenor's account of the trial for murder of Thomas White Hawk notes that testimony included "no discussion of White Hawk's Indian identity" or the "cultural schizophrenia" White Hawk suffered as a result of being forced to assume the role of a model "White Indian" ("Thomas White Hawk" 149; 129). Law continues to play a powerful role in legitimizing the oppression of tribal peoples.

Still, law is also the likeliest check on those hostile forces, and the arena most amenable to intervention by the compassionate trickster, because of its nature as narrative and, we could add, as play. In his chapter on "Play and

Law” from *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga notes that, at first glance, the two spheres seem diametrically opposed.

The etymological foundation of most of the words which express the ideas of law and justice lies in the sphere of setting, fixing, establishing, stating, appointing, holding, ordering, choosing, dividing, binding, etc. (76)

Such concepts seem hostile to the freedom pervading the spirit of play, until we remember that the rules of games perform precisely these functions: fixing and dividing the “play-ground,” establishing proper and improper moves, appointing roles, choosing sides, etc. More specifically, Huizinga notes that “the judicial process started by being a contest and the agonistic nature of it is alive even to-day” (76). Legal disputes in many cultures were and are decided by contests of strength or skill (*agon*), or of chance (*alea*). In any contest, the spirit of play animates the proceedings, and abstract notions like Justice are secondary to the spectacle of competition. Thus Vizenor frames the novel with the traditional Anishinaabe story of Naana-bozho and the gambler, who decide the fate of the tribe by playing the moccasin game. Chance, the realm of the trickster, is not inimical to law but its repressed essence.

The arbiter of competing stories, and the rules of the game which frames them, the judge is hardly neutral or “objective,” yet she may be or become sympathetic to tribal concerns, as Beatrice Lord does. The courtroom carnival in *The Heirs of Columbus*, like Bakhtin’s medieval prototype, signals and celebrates the inevitable “play” within the gears of the social mechanism. It is satire as critique but also as liberation, as the assertion of possibility. Beatrice Lord dons the “electronic blue moccasins” and enters the virtual “shadow realities of tribal consciousness” (84). In this cybertech version of the Anishinaabe moccasin game, Lord interacts with “the computer wiindigoo” (84), and by entering into this traditional story she accesses the homeland of the heirs, the woodlands, the river, the meadows peopled with deer, otter, beaver, and bear. By the end of her rambles in this virtual region, her understanding of tribal history and identity has crystallized.

The missionaries punished the shamans, biomedicine buried the natural healers, but shadow realities have convinced me that new shamans are on the rise with computers, and the legal issues of standing in federal court could be resolved with simulations. (87)

Standing in court depends on representation, both as legal function and as narrative art. Vizenor, and perhaps the trickster in general, expands our notions of what counts as a story, and who has the authority to tell one. In

“Bone Courts: The Natural Rights of Tribal Bones,” Vizenor argues that “tribal bones are mediators and narrators” of tribal history. That history, when represented at all, has been given incompetent counsel, we might say, by social scientists.

Tribal bones as narrators could be considered the *real* authors of their time and place on the earth; the representation of their voices in a court would overturn the neocolonial perspectives, written and invented tribal cultures. (65)

The question of representation gets us to the heart of Vizenor’s definition of tribal culture, which consists in stories, in representations rather than in physical or mythical presence. If this definition seems idiosyncratic, recall Momaday’s famous declaration: “We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. . . . The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined” (qtd. in Vizenor “Socioacupuncture” 95-96). Vizenor and his trickster characters are word warriors resisting this tragic possibility by revising and revitalizing narratives both pernicious (the “terminal creeds” of anthropology and tragic historiography) and potent (Naanabozho and the gambler). Inasmuch as legal standing is a function of narrative representation, these word wars or “language games,” and the rules that structure them, have high stakes indeed.

The central figure of tribal identity in the novel, the one afforded most “representation,” is really Columbus. Ironically and appropriately, his is the only character afforded the complex interior life sanctified by the novelistic tradition. We learn intimate details of his physical and psychic state: from the size and deformed shape of his penis to his anxiety over a secret letter detailing his experiences with blue storm puppets and a “hand talker with golden thighs” in the New World (44). Despite his tribal heritage, Columbus was “a modern man, a tragic man” (29), an *isolato* trapped in the “terminal creeds” and moral determinism of the Old World, the complementary opposite of the playful comic tradition of tribal narratives. While Columbus has his personal journals and letters and his religious and political imperatives, the tribes have their oral traditions, “stories in the blood,” indeterminate communal projects capable of assimilating the Other without resorting to the literal and figural violence to which Columbus was compelled. But the “real” Columbus is to be found in the stories in his blood and the blood of his heirs.

This is more than a romantic metaphor in *Heirs*. With the proceeds from their wildly successful sovereign nation/bingo-casino barge in international waters off Point Roberts, the heirs sponsor genetic research into gene therapy, isolating and reproducing “the genetic signature of survivance” from a flake of dried blood in the casket of Columbus. The resulting genetic

treatments, in conjunction with therapy from manicurists and luminous blue hand talkers, heals thousands of mutant children deformed by a dominant “chemical civilization” (147), the legacy of European conquest. As an individual figure, Columbus authored only destruction; yet as a comic *figuration* in tribal stories, his “signature” underwrites a tale of creation and healing. “The genome narratives,” explains one scientist, “are stories in the blood, a metaphor for racial memories” (136). In a series of characteristic postmodern tropes, the representation in language becomes more real than the material “presence”—or, more accurately, the distinction itself is deconstructed. Genes are metaphors for stories, and vice versa; the material evils Columbus wrought are overcome in their narrative reconstitution in the healing processes of tribal storytelling and genetic therapy.

To resist the reduction of culture to narrative, to insist on a material dimension of culture apart from “language games,” is not to be wrong, of course, but to simply miss Vizenor’s point. As Marx himself pointed out, language *is* material, a constituent of reality (not of course the only one) rather than a “mere” reflection of it. Vizenor’s novel should not be read as mimetic in the traditional sense; Vizenor is neither describing nor advocating tribal abandonment of traditional lands and modes of production for bingo, genetic therapy, and international waters. Rather, the novel is methectic, “A helping out of the action” (Huizenga 15), the action in this case being tribal “survivance.” Just as a ceremony—or Silko’s *Ceremony*—not only reflects but shapes the world it hopes to heal or “help out,” *The Heirs of Columbus* enacts and demands innovative ways of engaging and reading the world, and to that extent changes it. Vizenor’s work is tribal in this fundamental sense.

Like Thoreau’s, Vizenor’s vagance is both a style and a theme, form and content. In describing the trickster as a “comic holotrope,” Vizenor brilliantly encapsulates his nonmimetic writing style as well as his sense of tribal identity. “Holo-” means complete, entire, total, while “trope” means a turn, change, inversion. A holotrope, then, is a contradiction in term [sic]; that which is completely changing is never complete. What could it possibly refer to in the world, beyond a signifying practice it does not describe but enact? Like the trickster—or the Signifying Monkey—tribe too is a noun that really describes a *process*, the continual reanimation and representation of communal stories in evolving technological, institutional and discursive contexts. These contexts, like Momaday’s Jemez Pueblo, are not our native world, Vizenor seems to say, but we can appropriate them to ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In his discussion of Vizenor's first novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, Louis Owens has described Vizenor's style as a rather paradoxical blend of traditionalism and radical innovation (*Other Destinies* 230).

<sup>2</sup>In his essay "Naming Our Destiny: Toward a Language of American Indian Liberation," Ward Churchill argues that "tribe" is a central, sinister term in the colonialist lexicon, one that trivializes and in fact dehumanizes American Indians through its association with the breeding of animals. Churchill insists on the terms "nations" or "peoples." Vizenor would certainly applaud Churchill's goal and his emphasis on the importance of language. Vizenor's strategy, though, is to reappropriate the language of dominance in comic or satiric trickster fashion.

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The Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures will provide at least three panels for the American Literature Association's annual gathering of scholars from around the country. One panel will be devoted to writers and texts seldom found in university/college courses. There will be an ASAIL business meeting; the place and time will be posted.

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