

---

## Vizenor and Beckett: Postmodern Identifications

PAUL STEWART

“The danger is in the neatness of identifications.”

Samuel Beckett, “Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce”

Although epigraphs may be amongst the final things an author considers, they are one of the first things that the reader encounters. Gerald Vizenor’s epigraphs at the beginning of *Dead Voices*—as taken from Samuel Beckett, John Neihardt and Maurice Blanchot—seem to prepare the reader for a confluence of European postmodernism and Native American literature in the pages that follow. As such, the epigraphs function to provide a framework through which the novel can be viewed; they may even go so far as to recommend an appropriate framework through which the novel *should* be viewed.

However, how does the epigraph gain signification? What exactly is meant by the signifier “Samuel Beckett” in this context? Where to place Beckett’s name has long been a source of contention, with the competing claims of modernism and postmodernism, or Irishness as opposed to a general (European) humanity, played out across some sixty years of Beckett scholarship. The question that Vizenor’s use of Beckett as an epigraph for *Dead Voices* raises is exactly which Beckett is being invoked? In turn, what does Vizenor’s relation with *this* Beckett mean for the novel itself?

One immediate answer to the question of which Beckett is at play may be deduced from the inclusion of Maurice Blanchot amongst the epigraphs. Blanchot was one of the first French critics to recognise the importance of the novels of Beckett. In “Where now? Who now?”, a 1959 essay in the *Evergreen Review*, Blanchot delineated a Beckett that would be influential on initially the French and subsequently the Anglophone reception of the works. Crucially, the Beckett that was delineated was one in whom delineation was precisely at issue, as was the supposed security of the name “Beckett.” Asking “who is this ‘I’ condemned to speak without respite” in *The Unnamable*, Blanchot claimed that “by a reassuring convention, we answer: it is Samuel Beckett” (143). Such reassurance is short-lived for although we “try to recover the

security of a name, to situate the book’s ‘content’ at the stable level of a person,” the focus of the novel undermines such attempts as “the man who writes is already no longer Samuel Beckett but the necessity that has displaced him, dispossessed and dis-seized him, which has made him surrender to whatever is outside himself, which has made him a nameless being” (144). Ultimately, the voice of *The Unnamable* is one that inhabits “that neutral region where the self surrenders in order to speak, henceforth subject to words, fallen into the absence of time where it must die an endless death” (148). The Beckett that Blanchot gestures towards is one in which identity—however one might have characterised it—has been attenuated in the act of writing to such a degree that words take precedence over subjectivity; indeed the subject is only of words and in words or, as *The Unnamable* puts it “I’m in words, made of words” (104).

Blanchot’s account can be seen as sketching out the case for a postmodern Beckett: a sketch that has now been fully rendered, if not entirely accepted. The stress on dispossession, displacement and the dis-seized also foreshadows Blanchot’s later contemplation on the prefix “dis” (*dé*) that runs throughout *L’Ecriture du désastre* and which provides the final epigraph of *Dead Voices. The Writing of the Disaster* recognises the “horror—and the honor—of the name, which always threatens to become a title” (7). (“Title” is the translation given of *sur-nom*, which Blanchot delicately balances with *sur-vie*, survival.) Naming may be attractive given a certain nostalgia for certainty, but it is ultimately a containment against which a literature of fragmentation must be deployed. Yet, in its oppositional structure, fragmentation may itself inadvertently provide a means of coherence. Hence, Blanchot warns: “The fragmentary promises not instability (the opposition of fixity) so much as disarray, confusion.” The fragmentary, which Blanchot recognised in Beckett, is always shadowed by the possibility of giving credit to its opposite; fixity. Even the dispossessed, displaced and dis-seized can fade into possession, placement and the seized.

The Beckett-Blanchot axis of the epigraphs suggests that it is in a certain postmodern tradition that *Dead Voices* should be situated. Given Beckett’s and Blanchot’s “horror” at the name, it is ironic that their names are given such a position of authority within Vizenor’s work, but this might only be to yet further recognise the complexity of maintaining a discourse free of a restrictive subjectification. This is, of course, very much in keeping with Vizenor’s contention that “Postmodernism liberates imagination” and that the “trickster is postmodern” (*Narrative*

*Chance* 9). However, one wonders if the postmodern is a single entity in and of itself, or a multiple site in which Vizenor and Beckett engage, or fail to do so.

The site of that engagement is marked by the traces of Beckett's *The Unnamable* throughout *Dead Voices*. The most obvious relation between the two novels that the epigraph commends is the fragmentary nature of the stories that Bagese tells and through which she embodies a series of tribal personas: bears, fleas, crows, beavers and so on. *The Unnamable*'s central consciousness—who necessarily remains unnamed—momentarily adopts, or is forced to adopt, a series of “avatars” or “vice-existers” whose stories are then related. At times he appears to be the creator of these “puppets” and at other times the victim of their narrative attempts to say him into existence. The novel moves between first and third person narration and the question of appropriate pronouns is as crucial to the text as it is in *Dead Voices*, as shall be seen. Hence, the Unnamable “is” Basil and then the decrepit tramp Mahood, who is later found limbless and stuck in a jar outside a chop-house near the shambles, and then the more enigmatic Worm whose precise nature is radically at issue. We are told that previous avatars include major figures from Beckett's prior fiction, including Molloy, Malone, and Murphy from the novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *Murphy* respectively. Initially, this relation between the Unnamable and his vice-existers bears some similarity to Bagese's identities within the wanaki game. Just as the Unnamable is Mahood “for the space of an instant” (27), so Bagese “is” Bear or Praying Mantis for the duration of their tales. When the wanaki game is described, the question of agency and responsibility seems untroubled:

The player rises at dawn, turns one of the seven cards, meditates on the picture, and imagines he has become the animal, bird, or insect on the card of the day. Then stories are told about the picture and the plural pronoun *we* is used to be sure nature is not separated from humans in the wanaki game. (*Dead Voices* 28)

To enter into the game is a willing act of the imagination in which one adopts the identity of the animal on the card, in an attempt, as Kimberly M. Blaeser has put it, to make a “reconnection with life through imaginative story” (192). The self is effectively suspended as the player adopts a position of mediation, reinforced by the choice of “we” as the governing pronoun which plays across strict boundaries of discrete identities. As such, there is a momentary dislocation of identity in the hope of a shared, beneficial experience.

---

When one considers the problems the Unnamable has with pronouns, a very different tone and set of concerns emerge. At one stage, he abandons the first person as being “too farcical” (69), yet is unable to keep his resolve, realising that “...it’s the fault of the pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, that, it’s a kind of pronoun too, it isn’t that either, I’m not that either, let us leave all that, forget about all that” (123). Rather than an acceptance of a voluntary “we,” the Unnamable rails against the inability of language to coalesce with his condition (one hesitates to say “identity”) coupled with the inevitability of language asserting some form of identity, even if it is merely a “that.” Indeed, his relation with his avatars is at times one in which he is coerced into accepting that he is they; a form of enforced “we” along the path of becoming an indissoluble “I.” In this sense the “we” of *The Unnamable* would also be a mediating position, but the effects of this mediation are repeatedly rejected throughout the novel. So, the Unnamable claims that all “these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and me alone” (14). In order to be brought into existence, the Unnamable must adhere to one of the stories of his delegates, accepting their words as his, or “pronouncing my own words, words pronouncing me alive, since that’s how they want me to be” (48). The stories of the delegates adopt a principle of degeneration to tempt the Unnamable into adherence, but he maintains his indifference, claiming that they “could clap an artificial anus in the hollow of my hand and still I wouldn’t be there, alive with their life, not far short of man, just barely a man, sufficiently a man to have hopes one day of being one, my avatars behind me” (27). Although the Unnamable claims from the outset to be alone, the discourse quickly posits not only the avatars who foist their stories and identities upon him, but also a mysterious “they” who are intent on bringing the Unnamable into being, usually with suffering functioning as a guarantee of existence. The “[t]hey say they, speaking of them, to make me think it is I whom am speaking” (86). This dialectical approach is one through which the Unnamable is coerced into taking up a subjective position—indeed, to become a subject as such—when he desires nothing more than to stop speaking: “Ah if only this voice could stop, this meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing...” (87). Rather than the beneficial, communal “we” of *Dead Voices*, Beckett’s Unnamable is harried by a (possibly

imaginary) “they” intent on coercing the voice of the protagonist into an identity which can then be assimilated into a “we.”

However, *Dead Voices* is also aware of the coercive possibilities of exterior voices. In opposition to the wanaki “we” as employed in the “war with loneliness and with human separations from the natural world” (29), Bagese fears the “they” in the form of “the dead voices of civilization” (16). Throughout the novel, these dead voices threaten the immediacy of the wanaki game’s series of identities and the plural pronoun they promote. The “wordies” who wield these dead voices are inimical to the living voices of survivance and threaten to fracture the “we” of the game. For Blaeser, the “[t]rickster’s identity is itself a subversion of the Western mode of classification, resisting singularity...” (138), and, as such, a singular identity is to be resisted as being amenable to appropriation. So, Bagese as bear claims that “wordies held our name in isolation, even caged us on the page. We are bears not cold separations in the wilderness of dead voices” (31). To seize the name is to reify the fluidity of identity into one readily definable subjectivity that can then be studied, manipulated or (possibly most dangerously) dismissed. This claiming of the name is, of course, a question of power, as the metaphor of the hunter and prey makes clear: “We remember the world with stories that wordies would rush to discover, hunt, and capture in a name. The hunters pretend to own the world with names” (42). In *Narrative Chance*, Vizenor identifies these dead voices as those of the disciplines of the humanities and the social sciences: “The narrow teleologies deduced from social science monologues and the ideologies that arise from structuralism have reduced tribal literatures to an ‘objective’ collection of consumable cultural artifacts” (5-6). The teleological aspect is crucial here. The drive towards an end-point from which something can be judged effectively curtails any form of continuance. Hence, in “Bears,” the narrator’s “mouth moves with dead voices. How can he be so young and so dead? [...] How can he go on? He has no stories to remember because he asks us about our stories” (*Dead Voices* 31). Nicknamed the Laundry Boy because of the dead voice that is modern fastidious cleanliness, the narrator is unable to go on as his own stories have been subjected to the deadening effect of “civilized” voices and his querying of the wanaki stories suggests that the same deadening effect threatens their survival.

In the matter of the dead voices, two related aspects of Beckett’s work can be discerned: remaining unnameable as a form of resistance to subjectification, and the question of

continuance. The first aspect unearths a facet of Beckett that has often been downplayed: the political dimension. Beckett’s interventions in public political discourse were few and far between, and rarely unambiguous. A concern for the direction of travel of the Irish Free State in the 1930s led to some essays—such as “Censorship in the Saorstat” which condemned the wide-ranging censorship law of the Free State—that combined a hope for literary freedom with wider social, religious and political freedoms. When the Left Review canvassed writers and artists for their opinions regarding the Spanish Civil War in 1937, Beckett submitted only “¡UPTHEREPUBLIC!” [sic]; quite a departure from the earnest submissions of Ford Madox Ford, Aldous Huxley and W.H. Auden and others in favour of the Republican government. After fighting with the resistance in World War II, Beckett again seems to have made few overt political statements, although his private abhorrence of apartheid and other oppressive regimes has been attested to widely. The exception which one might say proves the rule would be the dedication of *Catastrophe* to the then dissident author, Vaclav Havel. In part because of the apparent lack of any obvious engagement with the wider political world, until the late 1990s it was almost a critical consensus that Beckett was an apolitical writer. Indeed, Peter Boxall has argued that up until that point

Beckett’s cultural capital in the west has been amassed on the back of his apoliticism. His value as a writer is directly related to his widely perceived ability to give aesthetic expression to a condition that precedes and underlies being in the socio-political world. [...] That he seems to offer a writing which can reach the limits of non-specificity, which can speak so generally about the pre- or trans-cultural truths of being, has been read as confirmation that art can do something that isn’t political, that transcends the political, that puts the political in its place. (208)

The apolitical view of Beckett could not be further removed from the deeply politically engaged work of Vizenor, in, for example, his framing of the constitution for the White Earth Nation. The activist Vizenor would appear to be some distance from the aesthetic Beckett. However, one should not forget that before such activism, Vizenor was often criticised for not being sufficiently engaged in practical political struggles. Craig Womack, for example, argues that practical political intervention might be marred by the style of writing adopted by figures such as Vizenor. Womack questions the “relevance of an inaccessible prose style toward intervening in

the real world” in which injustices towards Native peoples are rife. For Womack, the fluidity of identity within a book such as *Dead Voices* fails to realise that “Native literature [...] is a part of sovereignty” (*Red on Red* 72). As such, Womack argues that postmodern style is a barrier to political action in the name of sovereignty. However, one could counter that for Vizenor and Beckett, style is precisely political, as David Carlson has argued for Vizenor: “debates about whether political concerns should trump aesthetic ones in critical assessments of Vizenor are, in fact, misguided; his aesthetic *is* [...] deeply political” (14). Indeed, it is in the frame of style and the political that Beckett’s importance for Vizenor might ultimately lie, and it is a frame bound together with a notion of resistance. Michel Foucault, writing in the Foreword for Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, in which Beckett is frequently referenced, argues that “the strategic adversary is fascism. [...] And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini [...] but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us” (xiii).

In order to counter such a fascistic love of power, Beckett—whose work is repeatedly marked by impotence and failure—struggled with the basis of such a love; the process of subjectification itself. Terry Eagleton has argued that “in a world after fascism, self-affirmation has too sinister an infinity with mass murder. It is as though all action after Auschwitz is garbage. Better to suffer the pains of self-dispossession than court the perils of dominion” (xxiv), and that, for Beckett, “the word ‘perhaps’ is an anti-fascist weapon” (xxv). Such a fear of becoming a subject can be seen in the Unnamable’s refusal to be seized by any of the narratives and identities that are told of him, thus allowing him to retain his unnameable status as something proper to him but which cannot be defined as a subject. This refusal to enter into the name and thereby assume an identity is maintained throughout the novel, leaving the Unnamable still “on the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am...” (134).

Such a refusal is double in nature: firstly, the Unnamable will not be subjected to violent appropriation and, secondly, he will not be responsible for the violent appropriation of another. “All these Murphys, Molloyes and Malones” are imagined as a distraction from supposedly speaking of the self, yet it is clear that the Unnamable is also responsible for the suffering of his avatars in his capacity as their creator: “I thought I was right in enlisting these sufferers of my

pains. I was wrong. They never suffered my pains, their pains are nothing, compared to mine, a mere tittle of mine, the tittle I thought I could put from me, in order to witness it” (14). So the Unnamable foists suffering on to his characters in order to better assess that suffering, yet that process of witnessing indicates a return of the suffering to its source, as if getting to know the suffering of the avatars will lead the Unnamable to a better understanding of his own condition. Crucially, the Unnamable denies this return and throughout the novel the lines of relation are fraught and often highly ambiguous, if not improbable. Rather than accepting identification based on a shared suffering, no matter to what degree, the Unnamable denies such an identification through an assertion of difference. This refusal to give assent might, as Anthony Uhlmann has argued, be “one way in which [...] processes of subjection and enslavement might be resisted” (66).

Similar aspects to Beckett’s ethical and political aesthetic can be heard to echo throughout Vizenor’s novel and can be seen to coalesce in a single paragraph in the chapter entitled “Voices”:

There are more bears at the tables in the town than there are on the reservation. Our animals and stories have been hunted down to the last sanctuaries in the cities. The choice is between the chance of tricksters and the drone of cultural pride on reservations. The tribes were invented by these word demons who hunted our animals and buried our voices. The tribes are dead voices. We must go on, but there is nothing to be done. (136)

The final sentence is an amalgam of Beckett texts: “We must go on” echoes the “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” which closes *The Unnamable*, whilst “nothing to be done” is a refrain from *Waiting for Godot*, initially made in reference to Estragon’s ill-fitting boots, but also later used in reference to Vladimir’s hat. Less obvious is the passage’s Beckettian fear of the reification of subjectivity. In keeping with Vizenor’s comment that “social science monologues and the ideologies that arise from structuralism have reduced tribal literatures to an ‘objective’ collection of consumable cultural artifacts” (*Narrative Chance* 5-6), the tribe itself is here seen as an imposition of restrictive subjectivity. The tribe is circumscribed by some supposed essence—hence Vizenor’s claim that this arises from structuralism—which, whilst recognising the existence of the tribe as such, thereby condemns the tribe to a bound, locatable identity.

The question of location is an important one. Writing against a form of “blurry and limp hybridity” (205) in theoretical readings of tricksters figures, Daniel Morley Johnson has highlighted the emphasis of place in Vizenor’s use of trickster stories, arguing that Vizenor repeatedly allies trickster hermeneutics to “the tribal-national, the situated-ness of Indigenous knowledges in nations, homelands—in Anishinaabe people” (207). In contrast, Blaeser has emphasised the key to Vizenor’s trickster consciousness as “vitality, adaptability, continuance” (143), and “the *creation* of the place they will call home” (148 my emphasis), suggesting that location is achieved through the stories rather than a fixed resource from which the stories arise. In *Dead Voices*, rather than identifying the tribe with a specific, supposedly ancestral space, the stories of the novel are dislocated: they are both fragmentary and displaced into the modern city which one naively might have thought would have been inimical to the continuance of the tribal stories themselves. However, the alternative of a preservation of the stories within the reservation might only signal the decline of those stories into the dead cultural artefacts that Vizenor deplors. By displacing the stories onto the city, the deadening links to a culturally restricted locale are broken. A similar sense of displacement and dislocation also permeates *The Unnamable*. In order for identity to take hold of the Unnamable, he must be situated. He speculates that “since to me too I must attribute a beginning, if I could relate it to that of my abode” his beginning, and therefore identity, would be more assured (6). One notices that origin is as much a question of location as it is of chronology. Similarly, location is given due prominence in the series of questions which open the novel: “Where now? Who now? When now?” (1). “Who” cannot be answered unless the “Where” is identifiable. Unsurprisingly, then, the specifics of place within the novel seem contradictory as it combines recognisably Irish landscapes linked to *Molloy* with specific indicators of a French setting, such as the citing of the Rue de Brancion in the midst of Mahood’s tale. Just as the identity of the Unnamable cannot be seized, so the question of location is necessarily unanswerable as one is a facet of the other.

This relation between Beckett and Vizenor on the issue of location and identity suggests Vizenor intuited that what many regard as Beckett’s almost exemplary post-modernity needs to be viewed within a post-colonial context. To recognize Beckett’s Irishness—and in particular his Protestant minority status within an emerging Catholic inflected Free State—is not to limit him to a geographical, ethnic and social identity, but to assess how those limits informed his repeated

---

attempts to undo such impositions in his works. Writing of *Murphy*, which sees the eponymous Irish protagonist undergoing voluntary exile in London as Beckett himself had done during 1934 and 1935, Patrick Bixby has argued that:

The signs of a nomadic, unsettled, and decentred subjectivity, Murphy's perambulations transform his life story into an extended narrative of displacement that belies any grounded notions of personal or national identity and denies any passive victimization by the structures of socio-political power. (104)

Beckett, who was in London to pursue a course of psychoanalysis under Wilfred Bion, appears to have experienced the very imposition of identity that his texts would later scrupulously undo. James Knowlson reports that Beckett “hated London and was infuriated by the patronising English habit of addressing him in the pubs and shops as ‘Pat’ or ‘Paddy’” (186). In the *Letters*, he laments the countryside around Dublin—although not Dublin itself—and a week-long sense of “relief and vitality” on returning to London in 1935 is rapidly replaced: “now I feel beyond description worthless, sordid and incapacitated” (245). Beckett's escape from Dublin into an Irish-diaspora boarding house does not so much mean an escape from Irishness as a reaffirmation of Irishness; a reaffirmation which might be all the more irksome because it is imposed from the outside. All this is reflected in *Murphy*, not least when Murphy applies for a job as a chandler's smart youth. The cockney chandlers comment that “‘E don't look rightly human to me [...] not rightly” (50). One should hesitate here to compare the experiences of an individual to those of a collective, abstract notion such as Native peoples. However, such a hesitancy indicates the complex of problems associated with the imposition of a communal identity upon the individual which does not account for the particularities of that individual. Moreover, Beckett's experience of classification as a stereotypical Irish “Paddy” is the experience of being classified according to an abstract notion of national identity that one does not recognise oneself. Certainly, the particularities of Irish and Native peoples' experiences of imposed identity vary widely (both in comparison to each other and within the groups designated as Irish or Native peoples), yet the underlying structures of such an imposition remain to be read in similar terms in Beckett's and Vizenor's works and not least in the strategies to undo or avoid restrictive subjectivities in *The Unnamable* and *Dead Voices*. It is perhaps in this sense that we should treat Vizenor's claim that

---

he is “a hybrid document, unnamable on delivery” (*Native Liberty* 15); a claim that already puts Beckett’s sense of the unnamable within a post-colonial frame of reference.

If Vizenor’s and Beckett’s forms of resistance function to escape the imposition of coercive, subjectifying forces, one wonders why Vizenor claims in the very same paragraph that there is “nothing to be done”. If resistance is at stake, surely something *must* be done? Of course, one could define “nothing” as a positive, as a form of radical passivity towards those forces ranged against one. Alternatively, and more in keeping with the strategies of resisting restrictive subjectivities, one might ask from whose perspective nothing is indeed nothing? The Mantis story, which includes a wanaki-camouflaged bid for freedom through revolt, would seem to suggest that some form of physical resistance is necessary, yet the success of that revolt depends on the mantises being nothing in the mind of the female scientist they rebel against. Using the wanaki to access the flea and then the bear, the mantises succeed in being unidentifiable to the rational categorisations upon which the scientist depends: “She was so rational that if we were not wordies, or could not be seen in printed words, then we were not there at the end of the world” (86). From a rational perspective, the mantis-as-flea-as-bear is so multiple as to be no one thing, and so not amenable to appreciation and appropriation. On the level of the tribe, the drive towards categorisation entailed a further discipline of the dead voices; history. Hence, the rational anthropological history of the tribe that provides the mark of definition and makes the multiple into a single thing is to be feared. Two pasts are therefore played against each other in the novel; one of “history” and the other an alternative form of living continuance of stories as voices in the blood. “The past, not death, is our silence, because the past is the end of the war, the deception of peace. There is no past in the mirror, no past in stones or stories” (138-9). Of course, for a peace to be signed the warring parties must be indentified: one makes a treaty with a tribe or nation, not a multiple, complex identity which, quite literally, cannot be brought to book.

To do nothing, in this sense, is to not do something which is definable by the very dominant discourses and ideologies that are ranged against one. Even accepting that we are the one against which such discourses are ranged is to accept a dangerous, identifiable position. With reference to a radical *kenosis* or “self-emptying” within his works, Eagleton argues that, for Beckett, one cannot react against the crimes of Stalinism and fascism “with vigorous actions of

your own [...], since to do so would be to remain within the same noxious frame of reference, make a move within the same lethal game” (xxiv). As with Vizenor’s form of resistance, there is a refusal of the dubious solace of adopting an oppositional position to what is being fought; instead, a strategic evasion of the terms of the conflict as such is adopted. In a similar fashion to Vizenor’s mistrust of the languages of the social sciences, so the Unnamable is ultimately not amenable to the application of reason and the rhetoric of reasonableness. If he were to adopt an identity as “they” wish, it would be to enter into the world on their terms and perhaps for their benefit: “Ah a nice state they have me in, but still I’m not their creature, not quite, not yet. To testify to them, until I die, [...] that’s what they’ve sworn they’ll bring me too” (37). To become something on these terms would merely bolster the power of “they” and so the Unnamable trusts that “my inability to absorb, my genius for forgetting, [will be] more than they reckoned with. Dear incomprehension, it’s thanks to you I’ll be myself, in the end. Nothing will remain of the lies they have glutted me with. And I’ll be myself at last” (37). This evasion is given its most vivid, and one might argue most poststructuralist, form when the Unnamable “is” a tympanum: “I’m neither one side nor the other, I’m in the middle, I’m the partition, I’ve two surfaces and no thickness, [...] on one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don’t belong to either” (100).

This shared form of resistance between Beckett and Vizenor is, however, not as neat an identification as one might wish. The corollary of resistance is some form of continuance and as *The Unnamable* and *Dead Voices* move towards their ends the imperative to “go on” becomes evermore in evidence. There is, though, a difference in pronouns: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” has become “we must go on.” As has been repeatedly shown, the “we” of Vizenor is a crucial aspect in the resistance to modes of subjectification. It is the “we” within the wanaki game that acts as a form of mediation to the natural world and to the voices in the blood that have been threatened by the dead voices. It is a refusal to be captured by a singularity. It is, however, also a commitment to a form of the communal, to a social entity, even if that entity is not to be identified as a tribe, or a nation. “I can’t go on” is very different. With the first person, two possible alternatives emerge: to enter into a social relation (to become a “we”) or to utterly sever any such relation and to “be” a not I. The same alternatives do not apply to Vizenor; already “we,” the alternatives are to become a “they”—the very thing being resisted—or the disappearance of the communal, for the social relation itself to collapse. For the Unnamable this

is a threshold of absolute aporia: in order to be a non-subject he must adopt an imposed subjectivity for an instant in order for it to be then negated; but even that negation would be a recognition of its opposite. As such, he is condemned within the space between the I and the not-I. He may reject the game of identity, but there is no alternative to that game. Ultimately, the Unnamable is left in a neither/nor space, unable to go on and yet with no other possibility but to do so. This may be Beckett's final ethical sense of what is possible as resistance: only by an utter denial of affirmation can one slip the strictures of restrictive subjectivity. That this entails a sacrifice of the social may be the regrettable price Beckett is willing to pay.

In contrast, Vizenor's imperative to "go on" is by definition already social as a call to the "we." Thus, for Vizenor, the "postindian warriors create a new *tribal* presence in stories (*Manifest Manners* 12, my emphasis) and "trickster consciousness [...] creates the possibility for discourse that's *communal* and comic" (qtd. in Blaeser 162, my emphasis). Here might be the difference, then, in Beckett's and Vizenor's postmodernity. Both deploy a literature of dislocation and fragmentation as tools to avoid the restrictive imposition of subjectivity but, for Vizenor, this is part of a process, whereas, for Beckett, this is a point of aporetic impasse. Against the "simulations [that] are the absence of the tribal real" Vizenor deploys a strategic literature of fragmentation out of which can arise "new stories of survivance over dominance" (*Manifest Manners* 4), in what Blaeser has characterised as a deconstructive act with a view to a subsequent reconstruction (145). The Unnamable, in contrast, is left before the threshold of his story that is not passed, and reconstruction is left in abeyance, quite possibly because any reconstruction would merely replicate the structures by which a restrictive identity had previously been imposed. Beckett's ethical response is, then, one of withdrawal and denial; Vizenor's one of continued creativity with a view to an ultimately communal affirmation. Maintaining a sense of the social whilst undoing forms of restrictive identity is perhaps Vizenor's most difficult but most important task. Beckett's work suggests that, for him at least, such a task might not be possible.

These differences of an asocial Beckett and a social Vizenor might account in the end for the very different tones of *Dead Voices* and *The Unnamable*. For Vizenor, alongside a serious ethical commitment to social continuance, there is a certain joy to be had in the free-play of fluid identities. The cards of the wanaki are, amongst other things, a game to be freely played within

an almost ritualistic set of rules; not as in Beckett, a game one is condemned to play and for which the rules are indecipherable. The breathless frenzy of the close of *The Unnamable* is one of desperation that the threshold to the story will not be crossed and the Unnamable will not stop talking and fall into the silence he never stops desiring. In contrast, silence is feared in *Dead Voices*, for “our death would be silence” (137). Bagese may be harassed by the dead voices within modernity, but the game remains to be played as a possible means of joyously surviving those deadening influences and preserving the “stories in the blood” against silence (47). In Vizenor’s postmodernity *jouissance* is a possibility; in Beckett’s it is just a bad joke told too often.

#### *Works Cited*

- Beckett, Samuel. “Censorship in the Saorstat.” *Disjecta*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. London: Calder, 1983. 84-9. Print.
- . “Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce”. *Disjecta*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. London: Calder, 1983. 19-34. Print.
- . *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol.1, 1929-1940*. Eds. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Print.
- . *Murphy*. London: Faber and Faber, 2009. Print.
- . *The Unnamable*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010. Print.
- . *Waiting for Godot. The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990. 7-88. Print.
- Bixby, Patrick. *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Print.
- Blaeser, Kimberly M. *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*. Norman and London: Oklahoma University Press, 1996. Print.
- Blanchot, Maurice. “When Now? Who Now?” *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*. Ed. S. E. Gontarski. New York: Grove Press, 1986. 141-149. Print.
- . *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln, N.E.: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. Print.

- 
- Boxall, Peter. "Introduction to Beckett/Aesthetics/Politics." *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui Beckett and Religion; Beckett/Aesthetics/Politics*. Eds. Marius Bunning, Matthijs and Onnon Kusters. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 207-214. Print.
- Carlson, David J. "Trickster Hermeneutics and the Postindian Reader: Gerald Vizenor's Constitutional Praxis." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 23.4 (Winter 2011): 13-45. Print.
- Cunard, Nancy, et.al (eds) *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War*. London: Left Review, 1937. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. London: Athlone Press, 1984. Print.
- Eagleton, Terry. "Foreword: Nothing New." *Beckett and Nothing: Trying to Understand Beckett*. Ed. Daniela Caselli. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010. xiv-xxvi. Print.
- Johnson, Daniel Morley. "(Re)Nationalizing Naanabozho: Anishinaabe Sacred Stories, Nationalist Literary Criticism, and Scholarly Responsibility." *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations*. Eds. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010. 199-220. Print.
- Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996. Print.
- Uhlmann, Anthony. "Withholding Assent: Beckett in the Light of Stoic Ethics." *Beckett and Ethics*. Ed. Russell Smith. London: Continuum, 2008. 57-67. Print.
- Vizenor, Gerald. *Dead Voices*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992. Print.
- . *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. Lincoln N.E. and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. Print.
- . *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Literatures*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. Print.
- . *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*. Lincoln, N.E.: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. Print.
- Womack, Craig S. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print.