

## Gerald Vizenor's Transnational Aesthetics in *Blue Ravens*

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More than any of Gerald Vizenor's previous work, *Blue Ravens* deploys a transnational aesthetic which playfully explores potential avenues for Native<sup>1</sup> sovereignty, a space of self-determination opened up by artistic production that juxtaposes an Anishinaabe sensibility onto French war scenes and the urban environment of Paris, thus imprinting Native presence onto the land. It enables like-minded individuals to find refuge and create a new order in which Native voices are heard and artistic influence is mutual as Indigenous artists participate in the thriving cultural scene of interwar France. Indeed, Vizenor's fiction explores mobile forms of citizenship, which do not attempt to regulate subjects but allow a celebration of communal as well as individual identities. The novel showcases a Native relationship to space transformed by Indigenous art into inventive, transnational forms of aesthetic citizenship. It also outlines dynamic maps of transnational networks that nevertheless retain their Indigenous, tribal-specific focus even as they open up the field for new exchanges with global spaces. The focus on Anishinaabe art and writing demonstrates that tribal national specificities, when entering transnational space, can adapt and evolve without compromising their integrity. As this article will show, instead of breaking its ties to White Earth, the protagonists' art transposes Anishinaabe aesthetics onto Parisian locales, thus exploring new forms of Indigenous sovereignty that transcends political borders.

In order to situate the critical contribution of *Blue Ravens* within transnational Indigenous studies, I will call on hemispheric and transnational theories to help articulate international and global intersections, and I will also explore questions regarding the sharing of Native space and the regulation of Indigenous identities. To begin with, the novel underscores Native American peoples' participation in transnational spaces by drawing from the experience of Anishinaabe World War One soldiers. *Blue Ravens* is one of two recent novels to retrace the history of Native North American participation in World War One, with Joseph Boyden's *The Three Day Road* providing a Canadian counterpart.<sup>2</sup> When Gerald Vizenor researched the engagement of his family members in the Great War, he discovered that two of his forebears were drafted to France, simultaneously coming across other names from the region and more specifically the White

Earth Anishinaabe Reservation in Minnesota. He then used these facts as a basis for his fictional narrative, which is partly biographical and thus offers insight into what the experience of fighting might have entailed for Indigenous soldiers. However, the scope of *Blue Ravens* is much wider than a war narrative or an account of the legacy borne by war veterans, and in this respect differs markedly from other Native novels focusing on combat or its aftermath. The narrator, Basile Hudon Beaulieu, is a storyteller—or to use Vizenor's term, a storier—who travels alongside his painter brother Aloysius and narrates their encounters as well as Aloysius's evolving portfolio. The narrative moves beyond a mere focus on mobility to illuminate art as a spatial practice that enables a dialogue between Indigeneity and spatial practices in a foreign land. Art is the center of focus, in the form of both Aloysius's visual production and Basile's writing, the novel itself. Once the war is over, the Beaulieus move to Paris where they meet prestigious artists and achieve recognition within the art scene themselves. All the while, their connection to White Earth is maintained through aesthetic transmotion, an assertive sense of movement tied to sovereignty through "native motion and an active presence," as Vizenor defines it in *Fugitive Poses*:

The connotations of transmotion are creation stories, totemic visions, reincarnation, and soverenance; transmotion, that sense of native motion and an active presence, is *sui generis* sovereignty. Native transmotion is survivance, a reciprocal use of nature, not a monotheistic, territorial sovereignty. Native stories of survivance are the creases of transmotion and sovereignty. (15, italics in the original)

Art, therefore, enables international connections and exchanges through unrestrained mobility as the brothers create art pieces based on Anishinaabe aesthetics in various spaces. These aesthetics refer back to White Earth as a central node, which shaped the Beaulieus' artistic sensibilities and goes on informing their artistic production. Thus, Vizenor imbues art with the potential to transmit and transform Native modes of creative expression in innovative ways that speak to transmotion and ensure survivance. Padraig Kirwan more specifically articulates the potential of art forms to assert relationships across and beyond boundaries as a way of reclaiming Native space outside the reservation through "aesthetic sovereignty," which he defines as a "spatially-informed aesthetics" (*Sovereign Stories*, 27). Kirwan reads Native American texts as "expressions of tribal sovereignty" (23) that bear an "aesthetic" which not only expresses but also produces tribal autonomy (23), and thus articulates a critique of tribal nationalism in relation to

the "artistic, political, and cultural sovereignty" (37) found in literary works. The sovereign aesthetic which emerges can link "rhetorical sovereignty" with the current "political and legal debates" taking place in Indian country (17) by providing "a deeper understanding of both the means by which political movements are supported by the discrete mobilization of spatialized metaphors in fiction as well as critical theory, and an appreciation of the ways in which Native American fictionists create multifarious narrative spaces" (17). This helps conceive of a model in which the Beaulieus are not merely transposing Native artists into a foreign environment but actually engaging with the new urban space as promoting their Indigenous sensibility through their artistic, imaginative engagement with particular locales. Paris becomes an Indigenised space as the Beaulieus develop their artistic vision of White Earth through their presence in the City of Light, in turn inspiring international artists through their own production. One morning in Paris, for instance, Aloysius paints "a throng of blue ravens at the entrance of Le Chemin du Montparnasse" with "abstract wings," "cubist beaks," and "baroque talons" in reference to Apollinaire, Picasso, and Vassiliev (163). He thus adds his own Indigenous art, with a touch of Japanese rouge, to the street where international artists have their ateliers, referencing some of the masters who inspired him.

As Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart point out in *Global Indigenous Media*, maintaining a "local cultural distinctiveness" while also establishing a "transnational affiliation" allows an artistic support network to develop on a global scale and produces "works that question dominant worldviews while at the same time promoting a strategic, internationally conceived Indigenism" (31). *Blue Ravens* provides a fictional example of the ways in which such a model might work. In a similar line, the first chapter of *Indigenous Cosmopolitans* by Maximilian C. Forte also asks what happens to indigenous culture and identity when being in the "original place" is no longer possible or even necessary, and whether displacement signifies a negation of Indigeneity. Forte wonders how being and becoming Indigenous is "experienced and practised along translocal pathways", and how philosophies and politics of identification are constructed in translocal settings (2). These productive questions are key to a transnational reading of *Blue Ravens* as a narrative that creates a space for Indigenous art in Europe and encourages mobility for Native subjects. Vizenor's novel offers imaginative answers by staging an Anishinaabe painter and a writer who employ aesthetic sovereignty to inscribe Indigenous meanings onto spaces situated beyond the reservation, thereby re-envisioning them as Native

spaces where new kinship networks between similarly-minded artists and war veterans become possible.

Vizenor has progressively been working towards transnational Anishinaabe characters who use artistic expression to apprehend new spaces. His previous novel, *Shrouds of White Earth* (2010), also features an Anishinaabe artist whose art is showcased not only in other states but in Europe as well, thus crossing international boundaries in addition to artistic ones. *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* (1987) already manifested Vizenor's international vision for Native transmotion by showing how a White Earth English teacher finds a place for himself as an Anishinaabe trickster within Chinese culture by embodying the mythological Monkey King. *Griever*, however, is based on the trickster tradition rather than the artistic, cosmoprimitivist angle increasingly developed in the author's recent work. In his article “Wanton and Sensuous in the Musée du Quai Branly,” James Mackay argues that, in *Shrouds of White Earth*, for instance, “Vizenor is primarily concerned with challenging the colonially inflected power balance assumptions inhering in the word ‘primitivism’” in order to move away from a simple idealisation of the primitive (171). Mackay explains that the main protagonist envisions a “new art theory, Native Visionary Cosmopolitan Primitivism, or Cosmoprimitivism” to redress the assumption that although ledger art emerged decades before Chagall came to be known, “the native artists are seen more as representative of ancient Plains traditions while Chagall alone is the innovator and colourist” (177). *Blue Ravens*, then, pursues this thread in its representation of a painter and a writer from White Earth who become active participants in the avant-garde movement. In this novel, Vizenor's cosmoprimitivism transforms Indigenous aesthetics into a form of political subversion that inscribes a sense of Native presence onto transnational locales as a way of side-stepping U.S. settler rule over restrictive reservation policies. Enabling more inclusive models of sovereignty to move beyond such containment, the novel gestures towards a mobile, even international, vision of Native space. As an illustration, when posted in France, Aloysius paints “one, three, four, and seven blue ravens [...] in the back of trucks on the rough roads to war, at meals, and even in the beam and roar of enemy bombardments” (126), thus inscribing a sense of Native presence onto locales and events. This aesthetic Anishinaabe space is constituted by the artist's relationship to a place as a form of self-definition re-enacted through art rather than a prescriptive model of enclosure within a static tradition. Cosmoprimitive Native art is both mobile and capable of asserting tribal sovereignty throughout the world while

conversing with other art springing from compatible perspectives. Indeed, Vizenor extends Native sovereignty far beyond the reservation through a literary aesthetics that showcases art as a vessel for Native transmotion, which envisions new forms of artistic citizenship—ways of belonging that are established through artistic practices rather than strict notions of membership. At a gathering of artists and writers in Montparnasse, Basile tells the stories of "native totems and animals, and the presence of animals and birds in art and literature," aiming to inspire others to reflect on "the visionary presence of animals," while Aloysius discusses mongrel healers in the spirit of the fur trade, invoking a common history of exchange in order to stimulate the imaginative potential of the listeners (164). By so doing, the brothers not only call Native presence into the Parisian setting but inform the vision of other artists and writers around them and create a community of influence. In his review, Jay Whitaker comments on the autobiographical background of the novel, which is dedicated "to the memory of Ignatius Vizenor, the author's own great-uncle" and is "reminiscent of Vizenor's early years, including the extended family and community contributions to his upbringing in the absence of a paternal figure, his military service, and his work as a newspaper writer" (228). Whitaker also emphasises the author's contribution to Indigenous politics through "transnational and transcultural interactions" that occur during the war when the brothers "meet and learn from Oneida warriors on the front line" before making a place for themselves in Paris:

[T]he brothers, in their role as veterans, acknowledge that France is the place for them to explore and create their identities because the French soil and the French people remember the specific local traumas of World War I battles; the United States and the White Earth Reservation are in many ways too disconnected, despite the disproportionate ratio of casualties many Native American communities endured during the war. France becomes the place where these brothers can best cultivate their Native cultural productions and, in so doing, continue to form their Anishinaabe identities even apart from their homeland. (229)

France facilitates a particular relationship to place, as the events of the war impress themselves upon the land, and thus enable the Beaulieus to bridge place and memory in accordance with "a naturally reasoned existence in relation to a specific surrounding" that is "inherently Native" (229). As Billy Stratton points out, this perspective shares similarities with "what N. Scott Momaday terms 'the remembered earth,'" a feature which Vizenor transposes from Minnesota to

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other states and Europe as well as Japan and China (112). Thus, the setting of *Blue Ravens* allows its main protagonists to demonstrate "the active presence of Native people in urban spaces" while maintaining "their storied connection to the lands emanating from the White Earth Reservation" (112). The Parisian setting also provides a visual and imaginative freedom that contrasts with the federal stronghold established on the reservation (113), thereby envisioning a Native relationship to foreign lands that reasserts mobile Indigenous practices. Vizenor's "movement from hyperlocal to global sources of knowledge" is congruent with transmotion (Eils et. al. 214).

Furthermore, in Eils, Lederman and Uzendoski's interview article "You're Always More Famous When You Are Banished," Vizenor expands upon his vision of Native transmotion in relation to his entire corpus, as well as *Blue Ravens* more specifically, saying that more than being a geographical movement, transmotion allows a visionary, imaginative motion that participates in the "sentiment of continental liberty" for Native people (225):

You can live anywhere and have a story of presence on this continent, have a connection to the stories that created this continent—this hemisphere, actually—not just the metes and bounds and treaty borders and territorial boundaries. This is particularly critical for Natives—especially in border states, where in the past they could cross. Physically you had the motion to ignore territorial boundaries because your culture transcended it, but then with security problems, now you can't. My argument is straightforward: Native transmotion is visionary motion, and transmotion creates a sense of presence. (Eils et. al. 225-226)

He goes on to argue that new language is required to convey this notion, a language "that allows history to include theory and emotive possibilities for which there are no documents and that are critical in understanding a people" (227). This quote describes the *Blue Ravens* project very accurately. Through the Beaulieu brothers' artistry, Vizenor invents new literary possibilities that express transmotion as a way of piecing together the forgotten histories of war. For Indigenous peoples, that imaginative creativity is foundational to a way of interacting with the land as well. Vizenor extends this notion to sovereignty, stating: "I've only written about transmotion in the context of sovereignty—which is an abstract sovereignty—and literature," and explains that for pre-contact Native peoples, sovereignty must have resembled transmotion, in the sense of visionary presence, more closely than contemporary political sovereignty, which is territorial.

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Native relationship to the land was made of "reciprocal relationships" (226) and did not acknowledge borders: "Natives had extensive, dynamic trade routes throughout the hemisphere: north to south, usually along rivers but also trails [...] There were extensive trade networks" (227). Therefore, although transmotion is not intrinsically territorial, but rather visionary, it also offers a lens through which to apprehend a Native relationship to space that manifests itself dynamically in the land, according to principles of reciprocity and presence instead of ownership. These elements are key to a transnational reading of *Blue Ravens* because they underscore movement as an intrinsic part of Native life across centuries. The novel maintains continuity with such mobile practices by foregrounding more recent developments such as the First World War, thus demonstrating that a narrative centred on the White Earth reservation can also be transnational in its scope.

The transnational elements of the novel serve to illuminate the common oversight of Native studies in American studies. For instance, in their introduction to *Hemispheric American Studies*, Caroline Levander and Robert Levine propose a radical shift from regarding the United States as a somewhat unified and concrete entity by "moving beyond the national frame to consider regions, areas, and diasporic affiliations that exist apart from or in conflicted relation to the nation" (2) in order to approach American locales as "products of overlapping, mutually inflecting fields—as complex webs of regional, national and hemispheric forces that can be approached from multiple locations and perspectives" (3). Indeed, just as America and the Western hemisphere are inventions –politically and ideologically strategic ones (4), it is possible to see borderlands not just as restricted to the Mexican-U.S. border but as moving throughout many locales in the U.S., Canada, and South America (15). This latter point seems fairly obvious from an Indigenous perspective that recognises that settler borders not only exist within the U.S. but also create arbitrary separations with Canada and Mexico that have direct implications for everyday life. However, while *Hemispheric American Studies* aims to "chart new literary and cultural geographies by decentering the U.S. nation" (3) and "contextualiz[ing] what can sometimes appear to be the artificially hardened borders and boundaries of the U.S. nation or for that matter, any nation of the American hemisphere" (2-3), the volume gives little attention to Native American viewpoints. Indigenous peoples are marginally addressed in some of the volume's chapters but the introduction tends to inscribe Native Americans within an

undifferentiated flow of discourses and movements. Thus, although the book redirects critical attention toward a hemispheric frame of analysis, it does little to correct the oversight of Indigenous perspectives pervasive to American Studies. Furthermore, as a counter-nationalist project, hemispheric studies also pose a threat to the Native effort to centre tribal perspectives as a critical methodology.

In order to disrupt and displace American Studies as a monolithic site that perpetuates a colonial outlook, another more radical proposal would be to recenter Indigenous perspectives instead, for instance by considering Lisa Brooks's questions in her introduction to *The Common Pot*. She asks, "What happens when the texts of Anglo-American history and literature are participants in Native space rather than the center of the story? What kind of map emerges?" (xxxv). In her response to the tribal nationalist project, Shari Huhndorf also attempts to correct this particular oversight in *Mapping the Americas* by inscribing Native studies within hemispheric and transnational perspectives. As she points out in her critique of literary nationalism, "Although nationalism is an essential anti-colonial strategy in indigenous settings, nationalist scholarship neglects the historical forces (such as imperialism) that increasingly draw indigenous communities into global contexts" (3). The challenge is therefore to consider global issues without decentering Indigenous Studies but instead to examine the questions that arise from the frictions of gender, culture, the nation state, and their geographical implications (4). This is why the nationalist project was followed by a transnational turn, prompted also by a new focus on urban Indians and global tribal relationships (12-13). Indeed, Robert Warrior's article "Native American Scholarship and the Transnational Turn" promotes an articulation of transnational theory that emphasises how "the effects of capitalism, which were once contained and constrained by the sovereignty of nations, now supersede and trump the power of states" with a reduced focus on the national boundaries of settler states (119), thus opening up the field of enquiry beyond boundaries: "At best, the transnational turn describes the reality of what we often seek in looking for ways to reach across borders and oceans in search of consonance and [...] perspective" (120). Warrior does not, however, decry Native Studies' rejection of transnational theory (120), although the contradiction between cultural studies' view of "nationalism as a pathology" and Native studies framing it as survival (Womack in Warrior 121) can seem disorienting. For Warrior, "a resistance to [or against] ideas like transnationality" is not only "intellectually defensible" but can provide "fruitful theoretical insight" (122). It is their very



refusal to engage with the terms of transnationalism that has enabled Native scholars to articulate a nationalism "born out of native transnationalism, the flow and exchange of ideas and politics across our respective nations' borders" (125). Although "the discourse on nationalism remains [...] the domestic and international language in which Native struggle is waged" and provides "a primary vehicle for fuelling Indigenous imagination," there is scope to develop the field "toward a sense that encompasses not just North America, but the Indigenous world more broadly" (126).

Huhndorf offers Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* as an example of a Native American novel in which global connections lay the basis for an anticolonial revolution in order to demonstrate how an Indigenous agenda might reclaim worldwide networks. Such shifts test parameters that are at the heart of contemporary American Studies, where "[I]ndigenous transnationalisms in particular have extended existing American Studies critiques of national identity and imperialism as they radically challenge the histories, geographies, and contemporary social relations that constitute America itself" (Huhndorf 19). In her insistence on the use of visual representation as a central factor in colonisation as well as a tool for resistance to it, Huhndorf includes maps as visual representations that can be subverted and recreated to support land claims and thus become the visual technologies of Native politics (22). Such maps extend far beyond reservation boundaries and surrounding mis-appropriated/occupied land to constitute highly dynamic maps of transnational Indigenous networks that extend across the continent and hemisphere and run throughout the globe. Just as tribal nations have always practiced movement and relationship, they continue to develop and recreate them in ways that mediate Indigeneity across the world by asserting a sense of Native presence in unexpected places. In *Blue Ravens*, a group of Native men meet at Café du Dôme, calling it their "commune of native stories" and stating that the stories they tell each other in Paris become "more memorable than at any other native commune" (240). This instance stresses not only the possibility of transnational Native spaces but their vitality—in this case mediated through oral literature and Basile's later recording of the encounter in writing. As a geographical extension of Brooks's "common pot"—a space where resources are shared (3)—these connections create commonalities based on Indigenous perspectives that maintain awareness of their roots in tribal traditions while opening dialogues with the inhabitants of markedly different spaces, from America to Europe. Brooks demonstrates that the frameworks developed by tribal nations were adapted to negotiations with the settler and still constitute a useful tool to redefine land use and sovereignty. Art is well suited to

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communicate in such a dialogical space. Chadwick Allen remarks that Indigenous intellectual and artistic sovereignty is global in its scope (xviii), as is indeed the case in *Blue Ravens* where Anishinaabe art writes meaning onto transnational spaces. In *Trans-Indigenous*, Allen suggests that the prefix *trans* moves *beside, through* and *across* (6), thus representing movements susceptible to disrupt colonial order. Allen also insists that local work is of global importance not in opposition to but rather because of its relationship to a particular place (135-136). Although rooted in Indigenous locales and their specific histories, Indigenous art production speaks to global issues and enables the establishment of wider networks. However, he also remarks that there must remain a centre for art production to talk back to, even as other nodes emerge through exchange. Critics, therefore, need to postpone the urge to generalise from the local to theorise an aesthetic (141), instead adopting a more mobile framework that sees the local in movement through a range of spaces, just as when the Beaulieu brothers transpose Anishinaabe artistic imagination onto transnational spaces. There is a notable difference between the pan-Indian focus of Allen's *Trans-Indigenous*, which describes exchanges between Indigenous peoples across the globe, and the transnational scope of Vizenor's work, where Anishinaabe art is transposed onto non-Indigenous spaces. As mixedbloods, the protagonists of *Blue Ravens* attempt to rethink France as a place of origins as well as a site that bears the traces of colonialism.

The novel also tackles the question of belonging: leaving the reservation to establish themselves as artists in Paris, Anishinaabe characters suggest different networks of connection and kinship. Besides sharing stories about their experience of growing up on White Earth reservation, Basile and Aloysius do not refer to themselves as Native American. Instead, they rely on their art and storytelling to convey their particular outlook and sensibility as Anishinaabe subjects. This refusal to converge with the discourse of identity politics suggests alternatives for Native identities and relations. Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson argues that on the Kahnawà:ke reserve, people have recourse to their knowledge of a kinship network that enables them to recognise one another as tribal members regardless of official regulations regarding membership: "This archive of social and genealogical knowledge operates as an authorizing nexus of identification that also can and sometimes does refuse logics of the state" (15). The question of consent, of individuals and groups accepting the state citizenship offered to them, is at the forefront of conversations concerning membership (17). In effect, the granting of citizenship asserts the state's power (18), which tribal members can refuse to comply with "based upon the

validity and vitality of their own philosophical and governmental systems, systems that *predate* the advent of the settler state" (19). When it comes to overlapping claims to territory, Simpson argues that "[r]ecognition is the gentler form, perhaps, or the least corporeally violent way of managing Indians and their difference, a multicultural solution to the settlers' Indian problem. The desires and attendant practices of settlers get rerouted, or displaced, in liberal argumentation through the trick of toleration" (20). However, far from being benign, these tactics nevertheless conform to "settler logics of elimination" (12). In *Blue Ravens*, the Beaulieu brothers never identify as American, and in fact often behave in ways that challenge federal regulations regarding Native Americans; for instance, they routinely cross reservation boundaries without asking for the agent's permission. What is more, the freedom they find in Paris is positioned against restrictive reservation politics, suggesting that transnational practices correspond more closely to Anishinaabe identities than the negotiation of Indigeneity as limited to a reservation home base. The novel instead outlines a fluid relational network that starts by blurring the logic of blood relations as the only family model, history versus fiction and Indigeneity as tied to the reservation. The first chapter establishes partial genealogies and a brief history of the Vizenor and Beaulieu families—Gerald Vizenor's ancestors (9-10/134). The past is thereby reimagined in ways that create new possibilities for the present and future. In *Blue Ravens*, family is not restricted to direct descendancy and blood ties. The Beaulieu brothers, it turns out, are not real twins since Aloysius was adopted by Basile's parents, who raised them as "natural brothers" (3). Namesakes likewise share common characteristics, as though it constituted a kind of kinship (9). Basile describes their identities as "steadfast brothers on the road of lonesome warriors, a native artist and writer ready to transmute the desolation of war with blue ravens and poetic scenes of a scary civilization and native liberty" (8). There is a sense that artistic engagement provides a new type of family, created by the meeting of aesthetic sensibilities.

### **Geographical Movement**

The novel stages a series of movements: out of the reservation, across the Atlantic Ocean, and in the brothers' art itself, increasingly demonstrating the importance of mobile aesthetics in engaging with the French capital. From the start, the novel explores connections between the White Earth Reservation and other places, showing characters' mobile practices on the American continent. Movement is at the forefront in *Blue Ravens*, not only in terms of aesthetics but also

more pragmatically as a form of geographical curiosity, which manifests in the brothers' refusal to be bound to White Earth exclusively. Early on, the Beaulieus are connected to the world outside the reservation by the railway that brings travellers from Winnipeg and Saint Paul, and takes the brothers from Ogema Station to Minneapolis as they hawk newspapers (15). Train rides enable the brothers to touch upon the essential quality of freedom, which motivates their art:

The slow and steady motion of the train created our private window scenes [...] We were eager captives in the motion and excitement of railroad time [...] We decided then that we would rather be in the motion of adventure, chance, and the future. (27)

The names and possibilities of other places stimulate their imagination and artistic sensibilities, seemingly offering alternatives to the constraints of life on the reservation. When the Great White Fleet leaves San Francisco in 1908, Aloysius paints blue ravens on the ship masts and renames it the Great Blue Peace Fleet in order to represent "a greater sense of peace than the voyage of dominance around the world by sixteen white battleships of the United States Navy" (22). Already, Aloysius's art expresses a sense of Native motion that counters federal attempts to establish dominance both on the reservation and internationally, while allowing the brothers to travel in imagination far beyond the boundaries of their known environment along with the painted ravens to "Australia, New Zealand, Philippine Islands, Brazil, Chile, Peru" (22) years before they are drafted to Europe for the war. From the beginning, a tight relationship between movement, art, and politics is cultivated. Art is created in motion and, in turn, motion is represented through art, shaping the movement of Aloysius's blue ravens. Manifesting the impression of movement onto art, Aloysius also uses the Stone Arch Bridge over the Mississippi as a setting for "a row of three blue ravens [...] with enormous wings raised to wave away the poison coal-fire smoke" raised by the train (28). Abstract art documents the artist's presence and is further reflected by Basile's ekphrasis as he describes the scenes, writing his brother's art on to the landscape. Movement prompts them to create and is then captured onto their creation, which remain mobile through their suggestive power. The brothers also visit Minneapolis (39) to enable Aloysius to meet other artists and show his own work.

The Beaulieus spend several formative years on the reservation before being drafted to France. Once they arrive in Europe, the narrative reimagines the stories of White Earth veterans to stage an active native presence in the war. Basile's narrative also shows a tendency to romanticise the French and stresses a particular sense of kinship due to the entanglements of

Anishinaabe and French fur trade histories. The brothers express reverence towards "our distant ancestors, the fur traders" (107), and Basile describes French officers as "courteous" but "firm," in contrast to the "arrogant poses and manners" of the British (101). The brothers paradoxically experience the approach of France by ship as a "magical return and at the same time a discovery" (107)—the magical return to the land of their French ancestors, and a Native discovery of a different continent.

Three transatlantic crossings suggest longtime connections between Europe and Native America. Jace Weaver's *The Red Atlantic* traces the history of crossings in the Atlantic, starting with Viking settlements. Weaver takes into account not just geographical journeys across the ocean but also traces the various ways in which these affected the wider Native American population through economic and cultural exchanges. He shows that trans-Atlantic relations are not limited to travels across the ocean but soon involved inland inhabitants via trade networks, forming a "multi-lane, two-way bridge across which traveled ideas and things that changed both Europeans and American indigenes" (30). Far from compromising authenticity, "the cosmopolitanism and hybridity of Indians" actually demonstrates that "Natives and their cultures had always been highly adaptive, appropriating and absorbing anything that seemed useful or powerful" (30). In short, "The Red Atlantic is part of a larger story of globalization and the worldwide movement Western Hemisphere indigenes and their technologies, ideas, and material goods" (32). Weaver exposes many of the biographies that have been obscured, forgotten, or mis-remembered, revealing the erasure of Indigenous political actors and especially women, and representing them as active agents. Recentring the map across the ocean reframes the narrative of *Blue Ravens* as a series of crossings: in and out of the reservation, across the ocean to France, back to Minnesota and to Paris again, while also emphasising the continuous history of such migrations as reflected in the histories of French trading ancestors and Indigenous movement and exchange throughout the hemisphere. Basile and Aloysius repeatedly affiliate themselves with their fur trader ancestors to designate France as a place of origin as much as a new land for them to explore, which playfully destabilises binary notions of settler discovery in opposition to Indigenous fixity.

War does not prevent the Beaulieus from practicing their arts but, rather, motivates them to develop in new directions. They re-imagine their direct environment through their artistic production, which provides a means to shape stories and heal people and place from the events

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of the war, while also shaping their experience. Basile's war stories are published on the reservation, which prompts him to write and send his pieces regularly (97). Basile also reads a translation of Homer during training and service (103), inserting passages from *The Odyssey* into his wider narrative, thus establishing constant parallels between the epic and the brothers' lives as soldiers (108). Basile's book (and *Blue Ravens*), like *The Odyssey*, is written in twenty-four sections (90). By reading Homer in the trenches, he transposes another imagination onto the landscape, which provides another example of transnational exchanges, where an Indigenous American in France is inspired by Ancient Greece and, through literary aesthetics, weaves these elements together seamlessly. Reality is to be reinvented through art, storied imaginatively, in order to maintain a sense of presence and movement. Traumatic events are re-imagined through visual aesthetics to convey resilience, and scenes are often depicted as paintings themselves (116). Aloysius's use of woad blue, from a plant that was used to produce blue paint in Europe before indigo was imported, shows that his development, or adaptation, of Native knowledge in his new locale, creates connection between geographically separated forms of Indigenous knowledge. Its "elusive blues" produce "subtle hues, and the scenes created a sense of motion and ceremony" (126). The plant becomes part of the artist, whose blue tongue, acquired by mixing paint, earns him the nickname of Blueblood (126). It integrates history when he paints blue wing feathers on the cheeks of seven soldiers for combat (129). The scenes they witness turn into art themselves, albeit without being romanticised: "The war was surreal, faces, forests, and enemies" (130). Again, colours play a crucial role in Aloysius's rendering of war scenes, each of them possessing special significance. As mentioned above, his blue ravens are associated with memory and remembrance, whereas black has more macabre connotations. In Aloysius's palette, even "the night is blue" (2). During the war, the painter uses black in a painting for the first time to represent apartment buildings ravaged by German bombing (116-117). Used as war paint, charcoal also washes away faster than the blue paint (132), the latter leaving more durable and stable traces. The trace of rouge in the paintings, first suggested by the Japanese artist Baske, is reminiscent of "the red crown of the totemic sandhill crane" (120). War paint is also used on the reservation when a French Banquet is reproduced by John Leecy for war veterans (179), and later at the Parisian art gallery exhibition, when Aloysius paints a blue raven on his hand and another on Basile's face (276). Depictions of French war scenes both transpose reservation symbols and images onto the European landscape and act as signifiers of Indigeneity in the

Parisian artistic milieu where they come to stand as a symbol for the *mutilés de guerre*. Basile likewise travels in spirit through his descriptions: "I [...] imagined that the war was over and we had returned to the livery stables at the Hotel Leecy. The maple leaves had turned magical and radiant in the bright morning light that brisk autumn on the reservation. The sandhill cranes were on the wing, ravens bounced on the leafy roads, and the elusive cedar waxwings hovered in the bright red sumac" (135). This scene reveals similarities in the Beaulieu brothers' imagination, where the sense of aesthetics, colour, and vision is largely shared. Basile's depictions often look like paintings: "I might have become a painter instead of a creative writer [...] with a sense of color, tone, touch, style, and a choice of literary brushes" (205). The return to the reservation, inversely, brings the presence of French war scenes back to White Earth: "The First World War continues forever on the White Earth Reservations [sic] in the stories of veterans and survivors of combat. We were the native descendants of the fur trade who returned with new stories from France" (140). Continuity is thus maintained, even as the ocean is crossed for the second time, through the imaginative power of visual art and stories. Of course, the veterans suffer from the violence that their participation as soldiers has subjected them to: "The allied casualties sustained to recover these common country scenes have forever [...] haunted the memories and stories of war veterans on the reservation" (138). Although it ends abruptly, the war leaves tangible traces on both the soldiers' psyches and the land.

### **France, memory, and Freedom**

Following the war, France becomes a place of connection while the brothers experience rupture with reservation experience. Even when warfare finally ceases, places are marked and will keep memories of the war, transforming human matter into life-sustaining food: "The native forests and field would bear forever the blood, brain, and cracked bones in every season of the fruit trees and cultivated sugar beets" (141); a sense of active remembering and processing is missing from their home in Minnesota, where it is replaced by the patriotism, the "hoax, theatrical and political revision" (169) promoted by post-war U.S. politics. Finding that their capacity to create has been affected by the war, they obtain furlough and leave for Paris to pursue the "vision of art and literature" (144), where they encounter disfigured soldiers wearing masks and Aloysius paints ravens with abstract masks (147) that counter the somewhat grotesque realism of the soldiers' prosthetics. He deems the hornbeam leg a soldier carved for himself "a work of art" (149),

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emblematic of Aloysius's desire to create an "abstract work of art" rather than an "aesthetic disguise" (150). War provides a productive site to engage with remembrance in the face of the absences created by conflict and loss, in that respect not unlike the ongoing experience of colonisation on the reservation. The need to envision a different future thus creates a bridge between the Anishinaabe brothers and post-war French. Ravens are painted on diverse Quays and bridges, such as the Pont des Arts raven, which reveals "a native presence in our names, blue paint, and in my [Basile's] stories" (151). Thus, during their visit to Paris, the brothers establish their presence as Native artists through art, visiting the favourite meeting places of artists, such as Café du Dôme (152) and painting ravens in those locations (153) to act as "visual memories" (250). In Café de Flore one morning, the Beaulieus envision their possible future as artists in the City of Lights (153/154), and La Rotonde becomes one of the few "sovereign cafés" where artists meet and discuss politics (157), and argue somewhat extravagantly, manifesting similar behaviour to the "native conduct on the reservation" (159). Nathan Crémieux's<sup>3</sup> gallery provides a space where Aloysius's art is admired and respected. Knowledgeable about Native art, Nathan is moved by the blue ravens (155) and deems the art avant-garde (162), offering to frame and sell some of the paintings in his gallery (163). Thus, he does not participate in "[t]he French romance of natives and nature [which] excluded the possibility of any cosmopolitan experiences in the world" (161). Similarly, the Musée d'Ethnographie is criticised for abandoning native arts and sanctioning the theft of sacred artefacts (166), without mentioning "the voices of native artists," the "cosmototemic voices," thus adding a second crime: "the abuse of precious cultural memories" (166). France provides a space in which Indigenous presence can take hold, provided it is tied to remembrance. There is a strong relationship between land and memory as the former carries indelible markers of the latter. For instance, by dying in combat, Ignatius's spirit "returned to the earth of his fur trade ancestors" (164); showing that to the Anishinaabe protagonists France is not an exile, but a return, a coming home of sorts. Scenes of war cling to them, making the return to White Earth difficult for the writer and artists: "Aloysius painted nothing on our return to the reservation. He could not paint the reversal of war" (169). In sharp contrast with the freedom found in avant-garde Paris after the war, their homeland is under strict supervision: "We returned to a federal occupation on the reservation [...] neither peace nor the end of the war" (170). The gap between "federal and church politics on the reservation [...] and the generous cosmopolitan world of art and literature revealed the wounds of my spirit" (170) is hard



to heal. Despite recovering a "basic native sense of survivance," near Bad Boy Lake, they know that there is no "truce of remembrance" or "reversal of war memories" (172) on the reservation, and long for the freedom found in France: "the anthem of fraternité, égalité, and liberté was necessary on the White Earth Reservation" (176). Published under the title *French Returns: The New Fur Trade* (177), Basile's latest stories focus on Native veterans, thus manifesting his will to bear the memory of France but also his hope to return to Paris in the near future. Considered the "best of the outsiders" on the reservation (183), they no longer fully belong to the community and cannot lose memories of the war (190) that generate fear and weaken stories (191). Just as Aloysius is determined to move to Minneapolis "to meet with other artists, and encounter a new world of chance" (196), Basile agrees that "for my brother and me, the reservation would never be enough to cope with the world or to envision the new and wild cosmopolitan world of exotic art, literature, music [...]" (197). The letter from Nathan Crémieux telling them he has sold most of the raven paintings at his gallery (208) reveals a receptivity to the brothers' art, unequaled outside of Paris, where their aesthetics of motion as Natives intrigues and moves people. Applying for passports (211), they embark on their "return voyage to France" (215), again framing it as a homecoming that recalls the "premier union" of French fur traders "with our ancestors the native Anishinaabe" (255). James Mackay has drawn attention to a tendency in Native American literature to represent Europe in a positive light, indicating that it serves the purpose of building an alliance against U.S. power by drawing on "the deep-rooted sense of tradition shared by indigenous and European peoples" (170). Referring to Vizenor's previous novel *Shrouds of White Earth*, he notes that "the novel's invocation of France must be understood as a subtle countervailing force to what might otherwise be a simplistic anti-colonial screed" (173). However, even as Vizenor aims to "overturn the negative associations that inhere in the word 'primitivism,'" he nevertheless "celebrates notions of shamanism and native visionary art" (177) that may end up "reifying the category" (171) and its colonial undertones. Thus, once the war is over, what Paris offers to the Beaulieus seems to conveniently side-step the reality of colonisation; in opposition to the occupied space of the reservation, the city is largely idealised despite the protagonists' critique of ethnographic practices.

### **Transnational Aesthetics**

Finally, *Blue Ravens* suggests that an Anishinaabe artistic practice can establish strong ties with

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Paris as well as create networks based on its aesthetic sensibility. Art provides and maintains connection with Paris by enabling an Indigenous relationship to the urban space. In Paris, Nathan provides a safe environment for the brothers, becoming their promoter and protector as he denounces "the primacy of the primitive" as a product of "fascist sentiments" (221), believing that "natives had always been modernists" (222). In an echo of the *Paris school* of art, Nathan calls their art *Ecole Indienne* (225). Rather than framing this patronage as problematic, the narrative describes the gallery as a dynamic space of openness that makes Aloysius's art available to like-minded people and enables connection with other artists. Writing in cafés and enjoying food provides another kind of home for the Beaulieus. Basile often writes in cafés, finding the freedom that was missing from White Earth and meets up weekly with other Natives at the Café du Dôme, the latter becoming a "new commune of native storiers that had started many centuries earlier on the Mississippi river" (240). They establish a "commune of river veterans" who tease the two artists, a "native sanctuary" (246). These many parallels with life on the reservation demonstrate that, far from a rupture from their Indigenous background, Paris represents a fuller realisation of their artistic sensibilities while they retain their particularities as Native artists. In some ways, the capital becomes an artistic reservation for the Beaulieus, whose aesthetic heritage is honoured. Audra Simpson describes how in tribal contexts, the definition of membership can become a point of contention as to what the "terms of recognition" are: memory, blood, participation (40), or simply claims of belonging (41). Simpson proposes the term of "feelings citizenships" as a means to describe the "alternative citizenships to the state that are structured in the present space of intracommunity recognition, affection, and care, outside of the logics of colonial and imperial rule" (109). Distinct from membership (171), they represent "the affective sense of being a Mohawk [...] in spite of the lack of recognition that some may unjustly experience" (173). Although not formally recognized by institutional structures, these living citizenships are narratively constructed, linked politically and socially to "the simultaneous topography of colonialism and Iroquoia," creating "a frame of collective experience" (175) that functions in more fluid ways than institutional regulations of tribal membership. Simpson's research speaks from the perspective of Kahnawà:ke, where Mohawks strongly resist Canadian citizenship as it constitutes a direct threat to their sovereignty. In *Blue Ravens*, the Beaulieus never identify themselves as American but, rather, as coming from White Earth specifically, implicitly claiming Anishinaabe citizenship as distinct from the settler state. What is more, they

use their connection to France and its avant-garde scene as a way of circumventing U.S. settler rule on the reservation in order to find free artistic expression. Thus, despite emerging from a very different tribal context, and being less place-bound, the narrative also reexamines notions of belonging that are tied to citizenship, in this case through aesthetics.

Formative of the brothers' capacity to create networks around them, chance associations also carry over into the artistic process. First painted on newspaper print, Aloysius's ravens are distinctively blue, a colour tied to memory and imagination. Basile describes the blue ravens as "traces of visions and original abstract totems, the chance associations of native memories in the natural world" (1). Whereas black "has no tease or sentiment," shades of blue "are ironic, the tease of natural light" (2). Aloysius's ravens also stand out due to the types of paint he uses, "only natural paint colors" which his mother "made with crushed plums, blue berries, or the roots of red cedars" and by "boil[ing] decomposed maple stumps and includ[ing] fine dust of various soft stones to concoct the rich darker hues of blue and purple" (7). Later in Paris, he mixes natural pigments and honey (267). While Aloysius experimented with his blue ravens, Marc Chagall was also creating "blue visionary creatures and communal scenes" (2). The same summer, Henri Matisse painted *Nu Bleu, Souvenir de Biskra* (1); and Aloysius shared avant-garde, impressionist and expressionist features with Pablo Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (8) long before they met in Paris. Thus, the Anishinaabe painter's production is synchronistic with other innovative artists of the time, reflecting aspects of their genius even as it maintains local characteristics such as the paint he uses. While the Beaulieus grow up as Natives on an Anishinaabe reservation, their creativity lets them participate in another community with which they share certain aesthetic sensibilities simultaneously, and without any contradiction. Transmotion, it appears, can also entail that meeting of spirits across space.

Indeed, the brothers' claim to belonging to White Earth, although confirmed by blood and kinship, develops a rhetoric that asserts their attachment to the homeland but also encompasses a sense of Paris as a space compatible with their own Indigenous heritage. Indeed, the Beaulieu brothers are not alone in perceiving the world through an Anishinaabe lens: other non-Native characters are open to different points of view and understand the Beaulieus very well, perhaps fulfilling the notion that they have ancestors in common, a heritage to share—ties that are paradoxically stronger in France than in the U.S., where the reservation is described as politically corrupt, in contrast with "the liberty of France" (253). Aloysius creates many paintings of

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memory in Parisian locales ("memorial bridges were portrayed in natural motion" (220)), as well as ironic re-presencing of Natives from stolen stories: painted totem scenes (270), counterpoints to Exposition Universelle—the International Exposition—and Delacroix's *Natchez*, thus indigenising the city as well as incorporating transnational influences. Among them, Basile calls Apollinaire his "poetic totem" (213) while Aloysius borrows from the Japanese floating world tradition (226), echoing Hokusai in his ravens merging with waves. This Japanese influence on Aloysius's painting was initiated years before, in Saint Paul, when the Japanese artist Yamada Baske (44) invited the brothers to his studio. Baske admired Aloysius's ravens and understood them as "native impressionism, an original style of abstract blue ravens" (46). Before parting, he gave "a tin of rouge watercolour paint" to the Anishinaabe artist, advising him to add "a tiny and faint hue of rouge" to the blue scenes (47). This "master teacher" is the first artist who directly intervenes in the painter's technique, evaluating it with sensitivity and helping Aloysius move forward with his art. The sense of movement manifested by Japanese art is shown as compatible with the aesthetic transmotion of the Anishinaabe painter, and reflects Vizenor's longstanding interest in Japanese art and literature. Indeed, while serving in the US military, the author was posted in Japan in 1953 and borrowed from the haiku tradition, which he described in "Envoy to Haiku" as "an overture to dream songs" (26), implying that certain aspects of Japanese culture are highly compatible with his own Anishinaabe background. The 2003 novel *Hiroshima Bugi* also bears testament to the enduring influence of Japan in the author's work. Such convergences manifest the transnational connections which artistic expression makes possible in Vizenor's work. In *Blue Ravens*, Basile's stories are likewise connected to Parisian locales (284), ascribing meaning to those locales and affirming the artists' ties to place, thus suggesting a sense of belonging that is akin to Simpson's "feelings citizenship" but no longer attached exclusively to a reservation community, an "aesthetic citizenship" which the brothers transpose through art onto transnational spaces that become indigenised. Basile's statement that "the stories never seemed to really end that night" reasserts the sense of memory established by this coming together of artists and veterans in a "secure sense of presence", "a natural sense of solace" (285). The novel ends with a quotation from the last book of *The Odyssey*: "never yet did any stranger come to me whom I liked better" (285) so that the scene ends in perfect transnational harmony, a meeting of souls around visual art and story.

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## Conclusion

*Blue Ravens* turns towards France to situate the White-Earth-based Beaulieu brothers as artists at the heart of the modernist movement in Paris. Gerald Vizenor's novel thus proposes a model for the creation of transnational network of aesthetic affiliations that refers back to a tribal centre even as it explores other places. This model creates cross-Atlantic pathways that in some ways reiterate, and in other ways reverse, the spatial practices of the protagonists' ancestors.

Juxtaposing Anishinaabe perspectives onto new territories through aesthetics and exchange as the brothers' art finds an appreciative audience in Paris, the novel envisions a kind of Indigenous space where artists and other art aficionados develop affinities with Aloysius's paintings and Basile's stories. Non-Native characters manage to eschew the trappings of authenticity and acknowledge the fluidity of blue raven paintings as participating in the avant-garde scene of Paris as well as emerging from White Earth in distinctive ways. The novel thus encourages readers and critics to rethink notions of Indigeneity as bounded in place and provides useful elements towards a more transnational model for Native Studies; a shift that could bear particular importance for the many registered tribal Nations without an official land base, as well as Indigenous individuals who live away from their traditional homelands and/or communities. *Blue Ravens* thus asks productive questions about the significance of calling oneself Anishinaabe when living in global spaces, arguing that the category holds meaning far beyond containment within reservation—or even continental—borders. Instead, aesthetic practices that convey transmotion enable Indigeneity to write itself upon transnational spaces and establish new networks of belonging.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this article, I use the terms "Native" and "Indigenous" interchangeably to avoid repetition. While "Native" always refers to North American Indians specifically, "Indigenous" can apply to global Indigenous subjects more broadly. For more precision, I prefer to employ the term "Anishinaabe" where relevant.

<sup>2</sup> Bearing in mind that there is now a serious controversy regarding Boyden's claims to Indigenous identity.

<sup>3</sup> Nathan is a French gallerist who admires Aloysius's art and promotes his work by organising openings (where Basile also reads his writing) and selling his paintings. He becomes the brothers' protector and introduces them to other artists, thus helping to establish their reputation in the Parisian scene. While the narrative presents this relationship in a positive light, it nevertheless carries unsettling colonial undertones.

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