
A Dramatic Reading of Vizenor's *Bear Island* at the University of Michigan

MARTIN WALSH

On March 23 2018 Gerald Vizenor delivered the annual Berkhofer Lecture at the University of Michigan with a talk entitled "Betrayal and Irony: Native American Survivance and the Subversion of Ethnology." Named in honor of the pioneering Michigan anthropologist Robert Berkhofer, the lecture series was begun in 2016. N. Scott Momaday and Joy Harjo had been the previous speakers.

In honor of Vizenor's visit to campus the University's Residential College in conjunction with its Native American Studies program presented a dramatic reading of *Bear Island: The War at Sugar Point*, Vizenor's poetic meditation on the Leech Lake, MN battle of 1898. This was the last conflict of the U.S. Army with Native Americans as Vizenor documents in his Introduction to the published work, with further perspectives provided by Jace Weaver in a Foreword (University of Minnesota Press, 2006). The theatrical presentation took place in the Keene Theater of the Residential College on Thursday evening March 22. As head of the College's Drama Concentration, I devised and directed the reading on the model of Ping Chong's oral history theater works. The piece was scored for four voices and included two dozen projections of historical images alternating with contemporary photographs of the Leech Lake area, as well as Anishinaabe songs performed by the local Mino-Maskiki Singers (formerly The Swamp Singers). The latter were under the direction of Jasmine Pawlicki (Sokaogan Band of Lake Superior Chippewa) and included her daughter Shayla, Nancy Morehead (Little River Band of Ottawa) and Karen Schaumann (Passamaquoddy).

Bear Island is Vizenor's most extensive poetic work. Its short lines reflect the poet's lifelong engagement with the Japanese *haiku* form which he finds closely analogous to Anishinaabe dream-songs. The poem develops a wide variety of moods, lyrical, satiric, elegiac, journalistic, which easily lend themselves to oral performance. *Bear Island* is divided into six unequal sections beginning with the history and mythos of the Pillager Band and moving on to the climatic event from both the Native and White American perspectives. They are: Overture: Manidoo Creations/ Bagwana: The Pillagers of Liberty/ Hole-in-the-Day: Grafters and

Warrants/ Bearwalkers: 5 October 1898/ Gatling Gun: 6 October 1898/and War Necklace: 9 October 1898. Each of the four voice-actors had specific areas they generally covered with some overlapping. Anishinaabe language elements, which Vizenor uses throughout, as well as the majority of nature references were assigned to Ms. Pawlicki; passages relating to the U.S. Army to Graham Atkin; other passages relating to White encroachment and exploitation to another U-M Drama alumnus Joseph McDonald, with myself assuming the voice of and passages relating to Leech Lake elder Hole-in-the-Day (Bugonaygeshig) whose mistreatment by the federal legal system was the underlying cause of the conflict. The solo performances were punctuated with occasional multiple voices and staccato rhythms.

The historical images furnished by the Minnesota Historical Society included portraits of the military leaders Maj. Melville Wilkinson, who perished in the conflict, and Gen. John M. Bacon; scenes of Company E of the Third Infantry both before and after the action; portraits of Pillager Band elders; views of Sugar Point and Bugonaygeshig's cabin and garden plot; and the iconic portrait of him posing with his Winchester wearing the necklace he had made of spent cartridges gathered from the battlefield. Photographs taken by me around Leech Lake during a snowy weekend at the end of October 2017 conveyed the present look of the historical locales under weather conditions similar to those of the battle itself. Not designed to be point-for-point illustrations of the poem, the projections were faded in and out in a slow rhythm over the entire reading.

The Anishinaabe songs which bracketed and divided in half the reading performance were: "Pete Seymour Shuffle" from Whitefish Bay, "Shakaakamikwe" by Brenda MacIntyre (with Anishinaabe words by Margaret Noodin) and the "Strong Women's Song" which came out of the Kingston, Ontario Prison for Women in the 1970s. It was felt that a strong Native female presence would nicely complement the "tricky" victory of the Pillager warriors over the U.S. Army which the poem both celebrates and justifies but also finds deeply ironic. The multiple grievances of the Pillagers, for example, are juxtaposed to a long tally of the casualties inflicted upon the largely European immigrant soldiery.

Prof. Vizenor attended the performance and was extremely complimentary of the effort at presenting his work live. He graciously joined with the performers for a spirited question-and-answer session with the audience.



Bug-ah-na-ge-shig.

Chief Warrior in Battle at Sugar Point, Leech Lake, Minn., Oct. 5, 1896.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1896, by James S. Drysdale of Walker, Minnesota, in the office of the Librarian of Congress, at Washington.

Version of the battle from an illustrated weekly, mid-October 1898



LAST WEEK'S BLOODY BATTLE WITH REDSKINS IN MINNESOTA.
Fatal Wounding of Gallant Maj. Wilkisson, who Received an Indian Bullet While Bravely Directing the Fire of His Troops in the Conflict with the Pillagers on the Shore of Leech Lake.