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## “Transnational Narratives of Conflict and Empire, the Literary Art of Survivance in the Fiction of Gerald Vizenor”

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With more than forty books to his credit, including poetry, fiction, critical theory, journalism, memoir, and tribal history, spanning the last five decades, Gerald Vizenor has established himself as a prolific, versatile, and influential contemporary native<sup>1</sup> writer and thinker. While Vizenor's works have consistently addressed the legacy of colonialism and native peoples' responses to its effects, they are also distinguished for their frequent placing of native people and characters within international contexts. These interests can be traced back to his earliest writings in the realm of haiku and imagistic poetry, directly inspired by his experiences living in Japan while serving in the U.S. military. These include the volumes *Two Wings the Butterfly* (1962), *Raising the Moon Vines* (1964), *Seventeen Chirps* (1964), and *Empty Swings* (1967). He has continued these poetic explorations in more recent collections, *Matsushima: Pine Island* (1984), *Almost Ashore* (2006), *Favor of Crows* (2014), and *Calm in the Storm/Accalmie* (2015). Writing on the influence of a deep understanding of place via a sort of communion with a particular ecosystem and its terrestrial cycles in *Favor of Crows*, Vizenor states, "Haiku, in a sense, inspired me on the road as a soldier in another culture and gently turned me back to the seasons, back to traces of nature and the tease of native reason and memories" (xi).

### Cosmopolitan Origins

Vizenor's strong interest in international and transnational experiences is also evident in several works of fiction set throughout Asia and Europe. These include *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* (1990), *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (2010), *Shrouds of White Earth* (2010) and *Blue Ravens* (2016)—the first of a trilogy of novels<sup>2</sup> addressing the European experiences of Anishinaabe soldiers in the contexts of World Wars I and II. In these works, Anishinaabe culture and ideas take on indelible "chancy presence," transcending political boundaries while conferring a deep sense of global belonging (*Postindian* 19). Vizenor's use of common tropes such as border-crossing, international exploration, transnational native liberty, and dynamic transmotion are, in many ways, reflective of his own

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cosmopolitan experiences—initially through the tribal newspaper published at White Earth by his own ancestors, the *Tomahawk* (later renamed *Progress*); as a member of the U.S. military; and most fully as a transnational native writer, lecturer, and traveler. This cosmopolitanism would, perhaps, be natural for a native person, an Anishinaabe citizen of the White Earth Nation, the descendant of "postindian immigrants, and in that sense postmodern natives on the move from the reservation to modernity, the industrial world of Minneapolis" (*Postindian* 21). It is also natural for a storiier whose homeland, while centered in Minnesota and the Great Lakes region, also includes the rest of North America, as well as a world and universe. This is so by virtue of its very creation and maintenance through the dreams and thoughts of the *gichi-manidoo*, or Great Spirit, in the creation stories of the Anishinaabe, transformed and always transforming into its present form by the trickster, *naanabozho*.

Among the Anishinaabe stories of origins and world-creation found in Vizenor's works, he describes the pre-historical world as originally consisting of water without form, or as a disordered and amorphous non-place in the midst of a global flood where creation and renewal are constant. Within the broader category of creation accounts known as earthdiver stories, these narratives concentrate on the processes by which supernatural figures, with the help of various animals, work to draw substance from the depths of the abyss to establish solid ground where living beings can enjoy rest and relief. In *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), for instance, Vizenor relates the actions taken by *naanabozho* to accomplish this. In this work's opening, the narrator describes this figure as, simply, "the compassionate tribal trickster who created the earth" (5). The abbreviated description of creation that follows establishes a universal, native-centric, but non-exclusive conception of the world—which I have elsewhere termed, "heteroholistic"<sup>3</sup>—whereby "the trickster created the new earth with wet sand" (5). Vizenor's subsequent 1992 novel, *Dead Voices*, contains a more detailed version of this story. Here, the importance of cooperation in the process of creation are elaborated with *naanabozho* enlisting the assistance of various animals to restore the flooded world: "so he asked the beaver to dive down and rescue the last of the old earth, but it was the muskrat who came back with a little piece of sand, enough for the tribe to pack a new island on the back of a turtle" (111). In many ways such a conception of the world/universe is in harmony with the earliest conception of cosmopolitanism noted by Kwame Anthony Appiah as simply a "citizen of the cosmos" (xiv).

Utilizing *naanabozho's* wildly adaptive capacity as a ubiquitous narrative figuration in Anishinaabe storytelling and literature, Vizenor broadens their vital role even further, noting in *The Trickster of Liberty* (1988), "the trickster is a 'cosmic web' in imagination" (xi). As such, *naanabozho* is conceived and understood within a broader cosmological framework and as a prominent semiotic presence. Vizenor stretches the limits of the descriptive capacity for this ambiguous "tribal trickster" through the tease of chance and irony. In the essay "Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games," for example, he describes *naanabozho* as "a liberator and healer in a narrative, a comic sign, communal signification and a discourse with imagination" (187). Writing on the function and purpose of the trickster in storytelling and literature, Jace Weaver, observes Vizenor's prevalent use of the trope, stating that "in the very process of disruption" initiated by the trickster both *naanabozho* and characters that embody its traits and qualities succeed in "imaginatively keeping the world in balance" (*Other Words* 56).

The resonance of such ideas emphasizes the values of restoration, harmony, and cooperation. At the same time the inclusion of these qualities helps shift the focus away from individuality and isolated facts, events, and locations that are central to Western knowledge. This grants even greater significance to restoration, harmony, and cooperation when combined with the transcendent conception and identity of *gichi-manidoo*. The eminent Anishinaabe scholar and storyteller, Basil Johnston, defines *gichi-manidoo* as "the Great Mystery of the supernatural order, one beyond human grasp, beyond words, neither male nor female, nor of the flesh" (2). In his explanation of how the universe and all things in it were created, Johnston states, "Kitchi-Manitou<sup>4</sup> had a vision, seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, sensing, and knowing the universe, the world, the manitous, plants, animals, and human beings, and brought them into existence" (2-3). Similarly, this figure is simply described by the ethnologist, Frances Densmore, as "the master of life—the source and impersonation of the lives of all sentient things, human, faunal, and floral" (97). Anishinaabe poet and linguist, Margaret Noodin, emphasizes the global relevance and essential crux of Johnston's outline of these stories as a "way of saying the words of stories are medicine of the earth, information about all that can be observed, parts of universal understanding that are essential for living according to the Anishinaabe people" (112). Although native American creation stories may be dismissed as quaint myths, or worse, by non-native readers, the point Daniel Health Justice makes in *Why Indigenous Literature Matters* (2018) about native speculative fiction seems equally pertinent to oral tradition: "the fantastic is an

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extension of the possible, not the impossible; it opens up and expands the range of options for Indigenous characters (and readers [or listeners]); it challenges our assumptions and expectations of 'the real'" (149).

One of the major implications of this native order of things is that as part of a contingent, cohesive, and global whole, the wide-ranging Anishinaabe lands and lakes located in Wisconsin, Michigan, North Dakota and Minnesota—home to the White Earth Reservation—and of the larger Great Lakes region on both sides of the American/Canadian border, form the geographic center for what is known as "Turtle Island" by the Anishinaabeg, as well as other native peoples. The first person narrator of Vizenor's *Shrouds of White Earth* (2010) takes little time in challenging the imagined communities of European colonialism in a dialogic statement put directly to the reader:

rightly you query my use of that facile word, culture. I should be more specific about the use of popular, cosmopolitan, and aristocratic cultures, but for now my use of the word culture is even more particular. I mean a reservation culture, a culture of reservations, that reservoir and uncommon association of colonial, foisted, bribable, simulated, countered, postponed, and ironic good stories, taste and company. (6)

The artificiality of these national and political boundaries, imposed in the aftermath of European colonialism, is precisely what another Anishinaabe writer, Gordon Henry Jr., playfully labels as "parameters of residence" (*Light People* 76-79). For Henry, this was simply the result of the imposition and demarcation of reservation enclaves of native culture. Additionally, out of the same land seized from native peoples, other borders were drawn to delineate the political national territories of the United States and Canada to the North, and Mexico to the South. It is precisely these conditions that lead Appiah to highlight the arguments of contemporary thinkers who maintain that "the boundaries of nations are morally irrelevant—accidents of history with no rightful claim on our conscience" (xvi). Hence, despite the restrictions on freedom, movement, and opportunity they unmistakably inflict, such impositions alone are incapable of severing the spiritual connections or sense of global belonging the Anishinaabeg as citizens of an Anishinaabeg world, or any other native and indigenous peoples as citizens of their own respective worlds, maintain with the earth.

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### Colonial Encounters, Upheavals, and Resistance

In his revolutionizing work in native critical theory, Louis Owens sought to differentiate the world of creation from the context of postcolonial positionality through the adoption of Edward Said's idea of "strategic location" (208). For Owens, this conception aligns with Anne McClintock's critique of "postcolonialism" as a term that "reorients the globe once more around a single binary opposition: colonial-postcolonial" (10). Owens worked to articulate a distinctly native critique of colonial land in much of his critical work, conceived "as a kind of frontier zone, which I elsewhere have referred to as 'always unstable, multidirectional, hybridized, characterized by heteroglossia, and indeterminate'" (208). In a similar vein, Vizenor has sought to rectify the sustained exclusion of native people in postcolonial discourse by placing emphasis on the geographic claims and connections of native peoples beyond the limits of strategic locations bound to imposed and simulated reservation boundaries or liminal frontier zones invented by colonial knowledge. In an essay titled, "Literary Transmotion: Survivance and Totemic Motion in Native American Indian Art and Literature," Vizenor observes, "Native and indigenous cosmototemic artists created the first memorable scenes of presence, natural motion, and survivance on the slant of stone, and in the great shadows of monumental caves more than thirty thousand years ago on every continent" (20). For like the story of another trickster, the brother of *naanabozho*, who takes the elemental form of stone and appears in several of Vizenor's novels, as well as in Henry's *The Light People*, there is no place on earth without their presence.

Within the context of Western colonial discourse, native peoples have long been cast as brutal savages in the weaponized binaries which accrue meaning within the asynchronous and starkly linear context of European exploration and globalization. Vizenor cites the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia in *Native Liberty* (2009) as one significant moment in the concomitant establishment of geo-political "territorial borders, security, and state sovereignty" within this context (105). Conceived to bring to an end the Thirty Years War, this agreement also served as a mechanism by which the native, indigenous, and First Nations people of the Western Hemisphere were placed under the influence, surveillance, and purported authority of Western European ecclesiastical, monarchic, and military rulers (105). This exploitative state of relations was enabled, at least in part, by the systems of cultural classification and enforced criteria of normative appearance, behavior, and thought. One of the prime vehicles for the dissemination of

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such knowledge as an expression of imperial authority and power was embedded in spurious representations of native and indigenous people in the Western art and literature. The perceptions propagated by these discourses were instrumental to frequent dissemination of fabricated information about native peoples. Vizenor directly addresses this problem vis-à-vis frontier narratives in his widely influential article, "Socioacupuncture: Mythic Reversals and Striptease in Four Scenes," describing it as "the structural opposition of savagism and civilization found in the cinema and in the literature of romantic captivities" (83). Literary texts and artistic images were central in circulating disparaging images and descriptions of native cultures and peoples throughout Europe and the Americas. Such representations anticipated and exacerbated the nature and intensity of the conflicts typifying European imperial interactions with the indigenous peoples they encountered in the Western Hemisphere, as well as in Asia, Africa, Australia, and all parts between. In the most widely reproduced examples used as synonyms for native culture, Vizenor continues, "plains tepees, and the signs of moccasins, canoes, feathers, leathers, arrowheads, numerous museum artifacts, conjure the cultural rituals of the traditional tribal past, but the pleasure of the tribal striptease is denied, data bound, stopped in emulsion, colonized in print to resolve the insecurities and inhibitions of the dominant culture" (83). Taken as a whole, colonial modes of representation contributed to systems of knowledge and action that neatly aligned with readymade conceptions of barbarism, primitiveness, and cultural stasis (83).

No doubt influenced by such developments, and in response to the wider geopolitical dynamics spawned from European conflict, Vizenor observes that native communities were "already under colonial siege and disease, decimated by the first fatal contact with the dominions of 'globalization'" (*Liberty* 105). More specifically, he makes readers keenly aware of the ongoing processes by which Anishinaabe and other native peoples of North America were oppressed and "denied a sense of presence" in a world defined and divided by the mechanisms of Western knowledge and campaigns of organized and state-sanctioned violence (105). The particulars of this repressive system of imperialism, described as being "delivered by the breath and blood of monotheism and civilization" (105), have not just led to social isolation, cultural erasure, and forced assimilation, but also to the denial of "cultural hybridity, hemispheric contact and liberty" (106). It was a world that was rapidly expanding and torn asunder by the speed of transportation, advances in technology, and warfare. And within this context the lands, forests, and lakes of the Anishinaabe became a flashpoint of imperial fortunes and subjugation with the

arrival of French explorers and missionaries, along with the massive transformation and growth of the fur trade.

As Ian K. Steele points out in *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (1994), French efforts to monopolize the fur trade proceeded over a lengthy period of time starting with the expeditions of Jacques Cartier north of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in 1534, and later those of Pierre du Gua and Samuel de Champlain, resulting in the establishment of fur trading settlements at Ile Sainte-Croix in 1604 and Port Royal in 1605, culminating in the establishment of Québec in 1608 (59-64). As a consequence of these relentless colonial incursions, the Anishinaabe became entangled in the extractive activities that resulted. Vizenor details the impact of these events in an early contribution to indigenous autohistory,<sup>5</sup> *The Everlasting Sky: New Voices from the People Named the Chippewa* (1972), stating that "in the seventeenth century the first voyagers and missionaries of the Old World established a fur-trading post on the island [Madeline Island] near the sacred community of the people" (6). In a follow-up text, *Tribal Scenes and Ceremonies* (1976), he returns again to this theme, stating, "the fur trade interposed the first anomalous economic burr on the traditional survival rhythms of woodland life and the equipoise of tribal spirits" (111).

In response to the destructive cultural and spiritual effects of the colonial fur trade, one character in *The Heirs of Columbus* cynically observes, "the fur trade determined the future of the tribes, fur for sale was worth more than a hide packed with bones, feathers, and superstitions" (47). The expansion of the fur trade and its associated effects, as we know, brought widespread environmental disruption and acute trauma to native communities in the larger context of extractive colonialism. Nonetheless, Vizenor also doesn't shy away from speaking directly to the responsibility and agency that arise from the distorted rationales of victimry and ecological romanticization, noting, "tribal people from the mountains, plains and waterways of the woodland, transcended or ignored their religious beliefs and family totems by killing millions of animals for peltry" (*Tribal Scenes* 111). Positioning the French fur trade within the larger context of colonial globalization, Scott Lyons draws a comparison between the fur trade and the difficult negotiations native people were brought into in addressing European languages, including the fraught questions surrounding translation. Following Vizenor, Lyons observes that even in a "subordinate" position, the Anishinaabe still "played a fairly extensive role in the fur trade" (159). Although Basile Hudon Beaulieu describes this era of Anishinaabe history, which was

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also one of apocalypse, as "an eternal shame" in *Native Tributes* (2018), it is not one of limits or finality either. Instead, as he reminds readers, "the memory of totemic animals continued as a source of stories and images in native art and literature" (7).

### **Transnational Passages in War and Exile**

The wide-ranging and long term results of these social, cultural, historical, and epistemological dislocations is that Anishinaabe and other native peoples were reduced by degrees to the status of exiles, as "the fugitives of frontier, imperial, [and] mercenary sovereignty" (*Liberty* 108). Turtle Mountain Ojibwe writer, Louise Erdrich, illustrates the stark nature and effects of subsequent colonial impositions in the opening of her novel, *Tracks*. The narrative commences in the tumultuous period following the fin de siècle closing of the frontier as heralded by Frederick Jackson Turner with a narrator who observes: "it was surprising there were so many of us left to die. For those who survived the spotted sickness from the south, our long fight west to Nadoussioux land where we signed the treaty, and then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers, what descended from the north in 1912 seemed impossible" (1). Speaking to many of these same forces and impacts, Vizenor addresses the transnational and transhistorical effects produced from this context in the opening chapter of *Blue Ravens*. Here, the lineages of the two characters through which the narrative is told, the brothers Aloysius Hudon Beaulieu and Basile Hudon Beaulieu, are traced back along multiple lines of rhizomatic kinship: "Honoré Hudon Beaulieu, our father, was born on the north shore of Bad Medicine Lake. He was known as Frenchy. Our mother was born on the south shore of the lake. These two families, descendants of natives and fur traders, shared the resources of the lake and pine forests" (5). The composition of such stories that address the complexity of these cultural interactions in ironic and empathetic ways, especially those that place native characters in international settings and contexts, carry the capacity to effectively challenge circumscribed notions of culture and identity and its relation to geographic belonging.

Apart from bearing witness to the complications of intercultural contact and the inextricable web of familial interrelations resulting from the encounters between Anishinaabe and European peoples, *Blue Ravens* explores the border-crossings of some of Vizenor's own ancestors. In fact, their experiences as soldiers and nurses during World War I, including those of Ignatius Vizenor, Augustus Hudon Beaulieu, Ellanora Beaulieu, John Clement Beaulieu, and

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Lawrence Vizenor, are honored on the dedication page of the novel itself [5]. Such memorialization lends narrative substance to Jodi Byrd's observation that "to be in transit is to be active presence in a world of relational movements and countermovements," through the people, events, and landscapes Vizenor's fictional narrators see and experience in place of their real-life counterparts (xvi-xvii). "To be in transit," Byrd further emphasizes, "is to exist relationally, multiply" (xvii). An analogous sense of relationality is conveyed in the narrative trajectory of *Blue Ravens*, which provides readers a window into Anishinaabe experience emanating from the White Earth Reservation starting in the year 1907. The narration of the story itself is embedded in White Earth, before shifting to Europe and the horrors of World War I, which the narrator characterizes as an "empire demon more sinister than the ice monster" (109). Initiating a break from these parameters of residence, the story traces lines of flight to the reservation where the Beaulieu brothers experience a persistent sense of confinement and isolation, provoking a return to France where they would ironically "become expatriate native artists, a painter and a writer, in Paris" (109, 211). In the novel's sweeping exploration of the impacts that forms of "empire slavery" (278), and especially, its results bore on the Anishinaabeg of White Earth, Vizenor's characters utilize the potency of imagination to address the traumas of oppression, war, and inhumanity. Vizenor accomplishes this through the genre of historical fiction, building upon the broader transnational, postcolonial critique that extends throughout his discursive body of work.

Vizenor's concern for history and the way it bears on native individuals and societies highlights the truth that intercultural conflict and acts of war result in the massive displacement of native and indigenous peoples. Yet, the actual events of the war itself are not the focus of his narrative as the essential substance of *Blue Ravens* is primarily focused on the aftermath of World War I as told through the experiences of the Beaulieu brothers as expatriate artists, a writer and painter, who return to Paris to escape their ironic status as "political prisoners by the federal government in a civil war" (217). The thematic concerns this and Vizenor's other novels engender, which include a diverse array of characters including human, animal, and spirit beings, encourages readers to appreciate his sustained engagement with the multivalent sources, impacts, and legacies of colonization and empire building through the empathetic play and tease of humor and irony. Expressions, of course, that form the basis for his practice of trickster hermeneutics. The agile modes of discourse created with such elements allow the creative capacities of storytelling and art to be more effective in conveying the essence of survivance and native

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sovereignty, which Vizenor defines as "that presence in remembrance, that trace of creation and natural reason in native stories" (*Fugitive* 15).

Connecting the inevitable legacy of violence that proceeded from global colonialism to more recent and contemporary historical experiences that attend this context, Vizenor creates a complementary array of stories by which to explore the resonances and impacts on Anishinaabe people. In so doing, Vizenor establishes linkages between *Blue Ravens* and his follow-up works, *Native Tributes* and the yet to be released *Satie on the Seine*, by tracing the narrative threads to World War II, and the experiences of the crossblood character, Ronin Ainoko Browne, in *Hiroshima Bugi*. Readers are introduced to Ronin, the orphan son of Orion Browne—an Anishinaabe soldier stationed in Japan—and a Tokyo *bugi* dancer, known only as Okichi, as living on without "parents to bear his stories, no memorable contours, creases, or manner of silence at night" (15). Left at an orphanage following his birth, the use of Ainoko as a middle name is reflective of his physical traits, signifying "a *hafu*, or halfbreed child" (17), while he is also given "the name of the actor, Mifune," from which Ronin is derived (21). As these accumulated names imply, despite his familial isolation, Ronin is heir to a rich tradition in Japanese culture, invoking the famous image of the wandering samurai widely depicted in art and literature and whom serve as the inspiration for the heroic wandering samurai characters played by Toshirô Mifune in numerous Akira Kurosawa films, including *Yojimbo*, *Sanjuro*, and *Seven Samurai*. Finally, the surname, Browne, connects the transnational circuit back to the Anishinaabe world of Vizenor's stories through intertextual association with other dislocated characters such as Almost Browne found in several of his stories and novels. As explained in the novel, *Hotline Healers* (1997), it is a name derived from an accident of circumstance in which the character was said to be born "on the shoulder of the road [...] almost on the White Earth Reservation" (10). For Jodi Bryd, the historical contexts of transnational interrelations, war, and the effects of displacement that play out in *Hiroshima Bugi* prompts a consideration of "American Indian participation in and disruptions of conviviality within the transits of empire" (189-190). As is the case in practically all of Vizenor's works, the impact of empire cuts across various spatial, temporal, ideological, and spiritual coordinates and realities.

Vizenor highlights lines of correspondence across indigenous worlds through a narrative structure that reveal the novel to be a book within the book formed by Ronin's journals and the unnamed narrator of the "Manidoo Envoy" chapters, which alternate between those focalized

through Ronin. Identified as a fellow Anishinaabe veteran from Leech Lake, and erstwhile roommate of Orion at the Hotel Manidoo in Nogales, Arizona, who Ronin bade "to provide notes, the necessary descriptive references, and background information on his father and others" (9). These textual details, which included accounts of Orion's experiences after surviving a war in which he was "exposed to nuclear radiation," are conveyed as story fragments in Ronin's narration. At the same time, they transport the reader back to a site that bears crucial significance in so many of Vizenor's works: "he retired from the army, nursed his nuclear wounds, and built a cabin at the headwaters of the Mississippi River near the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota" (18). Emphasizing the healing powers of this sacred place, the narrator later reveals that Orion "recovered by meditation, native medicine, and the annual stories of survivance at the headwaters" (18). In addition to creating connections between native worlds, *Hiroshima Bugi* also highlights transnational linkages between the knowledge and stories of the Anishinaabe and the indigenous people of Japan who are known as the Ainu. These are described as extending to "natural reason, their creation, animal totems, and survivance" (51), with an unnamed narrator further asserting, "Ainu culture is based upon a world view which presumes that everything in nature, be it tree, plant, animal, bird, stone, wind, or mountain has life of its own and can interact with humanity" (51-52). The radical break with Western epistemologies and ontologies that understandings of an animate world gives potency to a transcendent and unbounded conception of the earth in which national borders, private property, citizenship, and identity retain little meaning.

Vizenor reinforces such ideas by emphasizing the inherent sense of belonging that Anishinaabe people may feel anywhere in the world, the significance of sites including Ronin's "nuclear kabuki theater of the ruins" at the Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima (3), and Orion's retirement home in the desert of southern Arizona, or in the Beaulieu brothers' escape from White Earth to the refuge of Paris. All of these settings are imbued with increased implication, perhaps, when considering the ways in which the stories they frame resist the "homing" pattern theme observed by literary critics such as William Bevis. While having significant force in classic native novels such as N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, which tend to correlate healing and recovery with a return to reservation lands, it is important to note the narrow limits of such interpretive models as well. As Angelika Bammer writes on the concept of displacement, for instance, when

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it comes to native and indigenous peoples, colonial and imperial policies resulted in the massive "expropriation of land that often left indigenous peoples with merely a small, and mostly poorer, portion of their [original] land" (xi). This situation notwithstanding, the exigencies of the homing pattern has not been without its critics. The Irish scholar Pádraig Kirwan, for instance, has asserted that the application of this mode of interpretation in some quarters has become "an automatic, enforced, and singular means to achieve relocation and deracination that results in Native literatures being disallowed sufficient room to develop a narrative schema that speaks of life in the urban centers or elsewhere" (3). Stephen Graham Jones is one native writer who has expressed skepticism for the efficacy of this determinist formulaic, stating in a publisher's interview promoting *The Fast Red Road: a Plainsong*, that the novel was written in part to challenge this determinist model.<sup>6</sup>

### **Legacies of Discovery and Empire**

The broader philosophical and historical valences brought to the surface by these ideas have also been addressed in several of Vizenor's other works, and numerous offerings by other native writers from Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Stephen Graham Jones' *The Fast Red Road*, to Louise Erdrich's and Michael Dorris' co-written novel, *The Crown of Columbus*, as commencing with the arrival of the Italian navigator in 1492 to the Western Hemisphere. Far from being seen as an isolated moment in history, which eschews "the binary axis of *time*," which McClintock critiques as "an axis even less productive of political nuance because it does not distinguish between the beneficiaries of colonialism (the ex-colonizers) and the casualties of colonialism (the ex-colonized)" (11), these works connect Columbus' landing to ensuing waves of colonial violence that were unflinchingly documented by Spanish missionaries and conquistadores such as Bartolomé de Las Casas and Bernal Díaz del Castillo.

The catastrophic series of events resulting from the so-called discovery and conquest of the 'New World' is taken up in *The Heirs of Columbus* as the foundation for the mythologization of the Americas and the operant masternarratives of divine providence and exceptionalism that animates colonial historiography. Events commencing with the landing of Christopher Columbus also form the context for subsequent interactions that led to the abduction of Pocahontas, the daughter of Powhatan, by English settlers in what was to become Virginia; circumstances that culminated, of course, in her untimely death and internment at Gravesend in Kent, England<sup>7</sup>,

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creating a situation that threatens to consign her to the status of a perpetual captive. It is useful to note that in addition to representing a decisive moment in native American history, the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival served as the occasion for the publication of *The Heirs of Columbus* itself.<sup>8</sup> As Kimberly Blaeser remarks, however, in her critical study, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*, "Heirs distinguishes itself from the mass of Columbus materials that appeared at the time by the unusual twists it gives to the legacy of the Columbus myth, boldly imagining the genes of the explorer as a source of contemporary healing" (95). The novel serves, in this sense, as an informative example that reflects the ways in which traditional native storytelling and literature function to deconstruct the artificial disciplinary distinctions between discourses such as history and literature, fact from story.

Among the numerous ways Vizenor uses his work to address the effects of violence, dispossession, confinement, isolation, and loneliness that bear on the lives of native people in the wake of European colonialism is through acts of creative appropriation. In *Heirs* this occurs as Columbus is rendered as indigenous, transformed, as it were, into "a trickster healer in the stories told by his tribal heirs at the headwaters of the great river" (3). The provocative and deeply ironic nature of Vizenor's reinscription of Columbus' role in the remaking of North America is one that aligns with Hayden White's notion of historical explanation by "emplotment," which is taken to signify "the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind" (7). The process of historical production shaped by narrative form is reflective of the essential uncertainty and instability evident in attempts to excavate the facts of the past, along with the human desire to make sense and create order out of the fragments presented by historians through sanctioned modes of documentation, but never through memories or stories, and much less, the dreams of native peoples. Vizenor deftly exploits the ambiguities and limitations that issue from such matters to challenge and subvert European claims to lands and resources of the Western Hemisphere founded upon notions of discovery and conquest, or colonial succession. Such is the case with the United States, Canada, and Mexico from their relationships with England, France, Spain, and Holland, formulated within a "culture of death" by papal and monarchic authorities, and then later by political and military force (10, 19).

**Obscure Heirs**

Columbus' own remote "Mayan" roots are attributed by Vizenor to his mother, Susanna di Fontanarossa, from whom it is said that he "inherited the signature of survivance and tribal stories in the blood" (9, 28). This provocative connection becomes possible in the story due to the obscurity that attends the tracing of matrilineal descent in Western patriarchal culture. The genealogical ties on which the novel's title hinges are made complete by the introduction of Columbus' purported indigenous partner, "a hand talker named Samana," who emerges into the story from between the lines and through the unstated implications of his journals (31). Prompted by the expected skepticism to this element of the story, perhaps, Vizenor shares his thoughts on the rhetorical and philosophical function of this wild circumstance in the "Epilogue" that follows the conclusion of the novel, stating, "Columbus arises in tribal stories that heal with humor the world he wounded; he is loathed, but he is not a separation in tribal consciousness. The Admiral of the Ocean Sea is a trickster overturned in his own stories five centuries later" (185). Thus, through his use of storytelling devices and narrative conventions that give cohesion to an alternate legacy for Columbus, Vizenor challenges the historical processes and constructs of knowledge that attend the deprivation of native people of their lands, natural resources, and culture.

The building of story around such "twists" is furthered through the creation of new reservations and native lands. The first of these is established "on the international border near Big Island in Lake of the Woods" (6), and founded by the evocatively named, Stone Columbus, an Anishinaabe crossblood identified as the "direct descendent of the trickster, stone, and Christopher Columbus" (9). As readers attuned to Vizenor's irreverent humor and comic irony may already suppose, this place will be no ordinary reservation as it consists mainly of "an enormous barge that had been decked for games of chance on the ocean seas of the woodland," and christened as *Santa María Casino* (6, italics in original). Vital to the understanding of Vizenor's critique of colonial history is that the casino is further described as a roving "trickster creation on an ocean sea in the new tribal world" (11). That the reservation/casino in this new tribal world is "anchored" beyond the contemporary boundaries of White Earth, as well as other Anishinaabe communities in the state and region, "straddling the international border between the United States and Canada," provides another opportunity for the deconstruction of

conventional notions of spatial territory and belonging (6). It seems important to note that the particular site of the White Earth Reservation had been legally retained by the Anishinaabe through a series of land cessions actuated by treaties between various Anishinaabe groups and the American government in what was to become the state of Minnesota from 1837 until 1863. These are facts that draw emphasis to the historical and political dimensions of territorial land claims throughout North America. Ones that were shaped by the dispossession and dramatic reduction of reservation territory, while promoting the legalized theft of tribal lands that continued beyond the treaty era and into the twentieth century through mechanisms such as allotment. As one might expect of a story offered as a means of challenging the facile and all-too-convenient assumptions about native peoples perpetuated in American literary and historical discourse, Vizenor offers forth an indigenized conception of land and sovereignty. Hence, the legality of Stone Columbus' reservation/casino is acknowledged through the ruling of a sympathetic federal judge who holds that "the essence of sovereignty is imaginative, an original tribal trope, communal and spiritual, an idea that is more than metes and bounds in treaties," thus providing a legal frame to the novel (7).

Another site that serves to extend conceptions of Anishinaabe land beyond reservation boundaries is "the stone tavern, that wondrous circle of warm trickster stones, [that] has been located for more than a hundred generations on a wild blue meadow near the headwaters of the Mississippi River" (4). The "trickster stones" referred to here are, of course, those linked to *naanabozho's* brother, and which "create a natural theater, an uncovered mount that is never touched by storms, curses, and disease; in the winter the stones near the headwaters are a haven for birds, animals, humans, and trickster stories of liberation" (5). Situated just outside this tavern one also finds "The House of Life," which is "the burial ground for the lost and lonesome bones that were liberated by the heirs from the museums" (5).

Binding these associations together is the Mississippi River, known to the Anishinaabe as "*gichiziibi*," a term Vizenor translates as "the cradleboard of civilization" (13). The connotation of this phrase teases at longstanding connections to the land, as well as its physical conception and epistemological significance conveyed in indigenous knowledge, recalling sacred associations that are stifled in the colonial processes of claiming and naming. Additionally, *gichiziibi* also reflects on Vizenor's broader concerns regarding the connections between native languages and place in which he states: "tribal languages were spoken in places for thousands

and thousands of years, and for that reason the place words are more dramatic connections to the earth. In tribal language and religion there are connections between vision, word, and place. And where people have visions, the vision was connected to the energies of the earth through words, a complex abstract connection" (Bowers 48). Clearly, the Mississippi River, understood through a metaphor that overturns Western binaries and Eurocentric thought, is one such place, while also appearing in the works of other Anisihinaabe writers such as in Gordon Henry's *The Light People* and Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*<sup>9</sup> (1998).

Stone Columbus is joined in his efforts to decolonize the land and history of the Americas and assert a sense of native presence and belonging that moves beyond colonial borders by his wife, Felipa Flowers. Early in the story, as a means of introduction, she is characterized as "the trickster poacher who repatriates tribal remains and sacred pouches from museums" (8). She goes to New York City on a mission in service to such ends "to repatriate sacred medicine pouches [...] the bear paw and otter pouches that had been stolen by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft" (45). The tactics Flowers uses in her efforts provoke questions centering on the fraught meanings of the terms "discovery" and "theft," and are undertaken "to atone for" what she calls "the moral corruption of missionaries, anthropologists, archaeo-necromancers, their heirs, and the robber barons of sacred tribal sites" (50). In order to secure the sacred items stolen by Schoolcraft, Flowers arranges a meeting with Doric Michéd, who is identified at first as an "obscure crossblood," and soon after as a "cannibal" (46, 54). Vizenor uses these ambiguous and conflicted associations as another means of challenging the shallow narratives of victimry and tragedy that have so often been used to deprive native people of agency and presence. Indeed, Vizenor's stories are set in a richly textured world in which cultural binaries, especially those that merely reverse the positions of civil and savage, are rejected. In addition to Michéd's "remote" ties to an indigenous community (48), he is also revealed as a member of a sinister organization known as the Brotherhood of American Explorers. This shadowy group meets in the so-called "Conquistador Club," whose motto is to "explore new worlds, discover with impunities, represent with manners, but never retreat from the ownership of land and language" (50). While representing numerous and conflicting identities, within the context of this organization, Michéd is portrayed as "a distinguished explorer and gentleman heir of the first Indian Agents in the territory of Michigan" (54). This is a distinction that further emphasizes

the complexity of intercultural relations and ever-shifting concepts of land and territory in the colonial period.

Michéd's conception of a world mapped, classified, and commoditized through colonial knowledge is placed in direct contrast to Flowers' understanding that "the world was united in clever tribal stories, imagination, memories" (46). Flowers manages to successfully recover the stolen items, but only with the help of "an eager tribal tent shaker" and reservation-less native named Transom (54). In fact, Transom is only able to liberate the bundles, along with a silver casket containing the remains of Columbus, from the museum vault where they were held by entering through a slipstream portal in the transmuted spiritual form of a "bear" (56). As such, this would be no conventional heist as the entry and escape were only made possible by a dimensional worm hole opened by "two black stones" that lead back again to the headwaters (56-57). When questioned by the detective in charge of the investigation into the disappearance of these items, Flowers challenges the colonial context of their very presence while asserting the spiritual claims of the Anishinaabeg in stating, "the liberation of our stories is no crime," before adding that she "would not reveal the location of the pouches" (60).

Although these narrative events give credence to the territorial primacy of the Anishinaabe within Minnesota, a more audacious understanding of the world Vizenor animates is posited through an attention to different conceptions of sense and understanding: "the New World is heard, the tribal world is dreamed and imagined. The Old World is seen, names and stories are stolen, constructed and published" (93). The impressions of these words, then, become the fading echo of Flowers next venture to retrieve "the remains of Pocahontas for proper burial by the Heirs of Columbus" (95). This mission, taking her across the Atlantic to England, sets the stage for the further deconstruction of the territorial restrictions imposed upon native and indigenous peoples. This plan is put into motion after Flowers is contacted by a collector of rare books by the name of Pellegrine Treves. He claims to possess Pocahontas' remains but asks for Flowers help in having them repatriated for a proper reburial in America (94). As it turns out, however, the information Flowers receives is part of a ruse concocted by Michéd who poses as Treves to regain possession of Columbus' remains. Reflecting the sheer brutality of colonialism and its agents, Flowers is abducted and killed while engaged in what she thought to be the rescue of "a tribal woman from the cruelties of more than three centuries of civilization" (115). In a dramatic replay of Pocahontas' death detailed in a detective inspector's report, Flowers' body is

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found "at the base of the statue of Pocahontas at St. George's Parish Church in Gravesend," on which it is written that "Felipa Flowers, may have died from exposure or loneliness at Gravesend" (117).

### **Movement and Belonging**

Flowers' murder and the trauma it bears upon her family forms the impetus for another journey by Stone Columbus, who travels to the Pacific Northwest and "declared a sovereign nation on October 12, 1992" at Point Assinka (119). Established five hundred years to the day after the landing of Christopher Columbus at Hispaniola, Stone reinscribes the date with an ironic sense of native liberty. Significantly, Stone's new nation sits at the intersection of international boundaries "between Semiahmoo, Washington, and Vancouver Island, Canada," in a reclamation of lands and waterways remade into "the wild estate of tribal memories and the genes of survivance in the New World" (119). The establishment of this new sovereign native nation by the heirs of Columbus occurs through the claiming of lands in a similar manner as Columbus and other European explorers. But their act of claiming is not one predicated on power and force, but done simply "in the name of our genes and the wild tricksters of liberty," further underscoring the sense of unbounded transmotion that Vizenor champions in so many of his works. These acts of transition and movement, but also liberty, culminate in the transportation of "the stone tavern, one stone at a time," by which "the earth was warm and healed at the point" (121). The broader significance of these interlinked occurrences and actions demonstrate the capacity for native liberty to operate beyond the limiting parameters of colonial borders, while offering another reminder of the boundlessness of stone.

In reverence of this principle and in honor of his deceased wife, Stone establishes the "Felipa Flowers Casino [...] on the international border between Canada and Point Assinika," in which "there were no inspections at the tribal border; indeed, the heirs honored tribal identities but no political boundaries on the earth" (131). Through the creation of this new nation, Vizenor provides a means for the "liberation of the mind" from common notions of the world as divided into counties, reservations, states, and nations founded on little more than social and political constructs and that act to sever native peoples' most fundamental connections to the land and the relationships that would be a natural result (155). In the place of such strictures, through Stone's efforts to "make the world tribal" through the acceptance of those with a "dedication to heal

rather than steal tribal cultures" (162), Vizenor offers his readers "native memories, stories of totemic creation, shamanic visions, burial markers, medicine pictures, the hunt, love, war and songs," which form "the transmotion of virtual cartography" (*Fugitive* 170). Within this same section of *Fugitive Poses*, he elaborates further on the theme of geographic meanings, stating that "tricky creation stories, totemic pictures, and mental mappery are the embodiment of native transmotion and sovereignty. Native mappers are storiers and visionaries" (170). The subtle associations and ironic turns that are apparent between Anishinaabe creation and trickster stories, and the transnational narratives that make up Vizenor's novels that act to "overturn civilization with humor" (*Heirs* 165), offer numerous sites of entry into a world and cosmos where a different kind of indigenous cartography has been drawn. A universe, a world, and "a place of the stones," of elements and substance that cannot be contained or circumscribed within the confining limits of colonial ideology and Western knowledge (170). And never will be as long as the stories of the people continue to be remembered and told.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In accordance with Vizenor's conventions on the use of capitalization in reference to the terms *indian* and native, but more importantly what this intervention signifies in terms of colonial representation and simulation, "native" and "indigenous" are rendered in lowercase throughout this essay.

<sup>2</sup> The second installment, *Native Tributes*, covering the period of the great depression and the infamous Bonus March, was published last year by Wesleyan University Press (2018). The third, and final, installment, *Satie on the Seine: Letters to the Heirs of the Fur Trade* will be published by Wesleyan in 2020.

<sup>3</sup> See "Towards a Heteroholistic Approach to Native American Literature," in *Weber: The Contemporary West* 29:2 (2013) and "Reading Through Peoplehood: Towards a Culturally Responsive Approach to Native American Literature and Oral Tradition," in *Twenty-First Century Perspectives on Indigenous Studies: Native North America in (Trans)motion*, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson's usage, Kitchi-Manitou, is an alternate derived from an older and Canadian-located Anishinaabe orthography.

<sup>5</sup> This phrase was coined by the Wendat Huron scholar, Georges E. Sioui, in *For an Amerindian Autohistory*, to challenge what he calls the "Americanization of the world" (xxii). As a form of decolonial praxis, the intent is "to show how modern American societies could benefit from demythologizing their socio-political discourse and becoming aware of their 'Americity.' That is, on this continent where they have just come ashore, they should see spirit, order, and thought, instead of a mass of lands and peoples to be removed, displaced, or rearranged" (xxiii).

<sup>6</sup> See also my essay, "For He Needed No Horse: Stephen Graham Jones's Reterritorialization of the American West in *The Fast Red Road*," in *The Fictions of Stephen Graham Jones: A Critical Companion*, Ed. Billy J. Stratton, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016), (85).

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, as an indication of a shift towards a more accurate depiction of this chapter of American history in mainstream American media, the popular account was the subject of criticism on an episode of TruTV's *Adam Ruins Everything* titled "The First Factsgiving," which originally aired on 27 March, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> *The Heirs of Columbus* was written during the same time as several other works that took a critical view on "discovery" by the likes of Kirkpatrick Sale and Noam Chomsky, coinciding with the 500th anniversary of his landing at *Guanahani*. An event that Vizenor's narrator says was renamed by Columbus as "San Salvador in honor of our Blessed Lord" (36).

<sup>9</sup> Erdrich subsequently revised this novel and republished it under the new title, *Antelope Woman* (2016).

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