

**NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN SURVIVANCE & MEMORY:
CELEBRATING GERALD VIZENOR**

**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, VIENNA
JUNE 20-23, 2014**

SPEAKER ABSTRACTS

KRISTINA BAUDEMANN

University of Mainz

**Ecstatic Vision, Blue Ravens, Wild Dreams:
The Urgency of the Future in Gerald Vizenor's Art**

“The order of things is never simply a given: it takes labor to produce, sustain, reproduce, and transmit the way things are, and this labor may be withheld or transformed,” Stephen Greenblatt writes in “Resonance and Wonder,” “[s]tructures may be broken in pieces, the pieces altered, inverted, rearranged. Everything can be different than it is; everything could have been different than it was”.¹ Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor has explored the intricate dynamics of words to alter, invert and re-arrange the order of things beyond the limits of representation. The literary repertoire of Gerald Vizenor's works includes theoretical commentary, philosophical considerations, historical documentation and fiction in various genres; he draws on his Anishinaabe heritage as well as on postmodern and poststructuralist writing, and on North East Asian philosophy and literature. Vizenor has composed Native haiku scenes as well as novels and short pieces that fuse Western literary styles with the Anishinaabe oral tradition. His first novel, *Darkness in St. Louis Bearheart* (1978), is the avant-gardist indigenous science fiction novel and natural reason, not a monstrous supplement or a sensationalist pose of pulp writing. This conference paper intends to shed light on the urgency of the future in Gerald Vizenor's art. The Anishinaabe nouveau romancier creates the linchpin to a profound change of our reality that operates, on the one hand, on a thematic level (alternate histories and historical fiction) and, on the other hand, on the level of signification (trickster hermeneutics). Linking the nature of the socio-political manifesto with the aesthetic of “original abstract totems[,] [...] a visionary sense of native presence,”² Vizenor furthermore maps out a tangible vision of the future: wild dreams are firmly rooted in the natural world; art harbors the power of liberation and cultural translation; Frantz Fanon's notion of colonialism as a genetic disease is complemented by Vizenor's idea of healing genes in *The Heirs of Columbus* that can be understood as both a Native futurism (fantastic future reality) and a textual strategy (semantic completion). Gerald Vizenor thus

¹ Cf. Greenblatt, Stephen. “Resonance and Wonder.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2010. 2155

² Cf. Vizenor, Gerald. *Blue Ravens. Historical Novel*. Middletown, CO: Wesleyan UP, 2014.1-3.

creates an ecstatic vision the mending power of which extends beyond the scope of postcolonialist theory.

KIMBERLY BLAESER

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Vizenor and the Power of Transitive Memories

In the work of White Earth Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor where nothing remains static, memory too performs – as literary process and as a mixedblood tool of survivance. From the “visual memories” of haiku to the “transitive memories” of autobiographical stories, active memory or re-remembering becomes linked to the sovereignty of what Vizenor has called “transmotion.” “Remembrance,” he claims in “Crows Written on the Poplars,” “is a natural current that breaks with the spring tides; the curious imagine a sensual undine on the wash” (103). The particular alchemy of memory in the theoretical and creative work of Vizenor involves complicated connective acts: the imaginative linking of personages, historical events, stories, and the construction of moments “past the barriers” or outside conventional notions of time.

This paper looks at both the philosophical grounding Vizenor finds in Anishinaabe teaching for his understanding of memory as transitive being and at moments in his poetry, fiction, and personal stories in which he enacts that understanding. In works like *Choir of Memory*, *Interior Landscapes*, or *Hiroshima Bugi*, Vizenor’s remembered stories refuse to adhere to a single stroke of the pen or the clock; stories of crows, squirrels, tricksters, ancestors, and cultural confrontations transform into new versions of themselves materializing in other places and eras. Memory itself is sometimes depicted as “the destroyer of peace,” sometimes as “sacred.” Similarly, specific memories stubbornly refuse to “mean” in his accounts, but instead remain a “tease” or a storier’s tentative harmony. Analogous to Anishinaabe visual arts and dream songs, the recollected stories – these assembled fragments of lives told and retold – resist existence as documents and move constantly beyond the edges of representation, become rather a “shimmer of memory.”

KARSTEN FITZ

University of Passau

Postindian Survivance as Analytical Framework in Native American Studies

Whether in poems, novels, paintings or films, for centuries, Native Americans have been culturally invented and represented from the outside – by the non-indigenous mainstream majority. In his ground-breaking study *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (1994) Gerald Vizenor termed such invented narratives of victimry and tragedy “simulations of dominance” which represent the continuing “manifest manners” of the mainstream society. Against this background, Vizenor defined Native American artists as “postindian warriors” who are engaged in producing real and authentic counter-narratives of “survivance.” What at first sight seemed to have been an elaborate rhetorical move by an inventive Native American intellectual influenced by postmodernist thinking some twenty years ago, namely the coining of

the concept of “postindian survivance,” has developed into a widely used concept in Native American Studies – and even beyond. This paper will deal with the impact of Vizenor’s concept of postindian survivance on Native American Studies since its creation two decades ago. On the one hand, it will look at how an aesthetics of survivance has developed over time and investigate the new dimensions added since its inception. In a second step, it will trace how survivance has helped both, theoretically and practically, to grasp the vast array of cultural accomplishments by Native Americans over time and across different disciplines. These range from the sermons by William Apress, via the performances of Will Rogers to the academic skills acquired by Native students in Ivy League universities – and they cover such seemingly disparate fields as Trickster hermeneutics and ecocritical approaches to literature, visual arts and rhetoric, as well as the realms of museology and educational anthropology.

ALEXANDRA GANSER

University of Vienna

Gerald Vizenor: Transnational Trickster of Theory

Tensions between a poetics of anti-colonial repudiation of hegemonic, non-native forms of discourse on the one hand and of postcolonial strategies of appropriation on the other have informed native North American cultural expression ever since the European invasion and conquest of America. This paper explores Gerald Vizenor’s theoretical response to this dilemma, focusing on his creative interactions with European theory – especially C.G. Jung’s writings on the trickster as archetype and Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacrum – as a form of ‘theorizing back’ to dominant theoretical methodologies. I will suggest that Vizenor’s theoretical work, inspired by European intellectuals (who themselves were heavily influenced by their particular experiences of America in the case of Jung and Baudrillard), can be read as an ironic commentary on western structures of knowledge. Vizenor is talking back to both Jung and Baudrillard: his acts of theoretical appropriation and adaptation and their meaning in a Native North American context also unmask the Eurocentricity (or ‘Westerncentricity’) of the theoretical texts Vizenor draws on. From a meta-theoretical perspective, Gerald Vizenor’s writings disturb European criticism from the vantage point of Native North American coloniality and cultural difference, questioning traditional intellectual discourse, rationalist universalisms, and elitist academic language and offering an alterNative version of postmodernism.

CHRIS LALONDE

State University of New York, Oswego

Jiibayag Ashegiwe:

Revenants, Gerald Vizenor, *Odazhe-giiwenigon*

Early in *Shrouds of White Earth* (2010), Douglas Roy Beaulieu tells his friend, “You know, the executioners, otherwise the tradition fascists, should be wary of my revenant creatures” (Vizenor

5). Twenty-some years before, Gerald Vizenor asked us to think of trickster as a “revenant holotrope in new and recurrent narratives” (*Narrative Chance* 205). Taking Vizenor at his word, if you will, let us take the measure of what haunts him and haunts his texts. In addition to *Shrouds of White Earth* and *Narrative Chance*, attention to haunting presences in *The Everlasting Sky*, *Dead Voices*, and *Hiroshima Bugi* will enable us to see both that which comes back, again and again, why it returns, and why Vizenor’s work mustn’t be allowed to fade from view.

A. ROBERT LEE

Nihon University, Tokyo

The Late Mr. Vizenor: Recent Storyings

Any notion of a slow-down in Gerald Vizenor’s literary production would be almost ludicrously off-base. His imagination remains un-dimmed and, equally, un-de-accelerated. Four latest narratives give confirmation: *Father Meme*, *Shrouds of White Earth*, *Chair of Tears* and *Blue Ravens*. This presentation, albeit briefly, addresses all three as to their fashioning – the modes of voice in play, the tactics of counterpoint, fold, memory, play of motif and image. It has been one thing to celebrate Vizenor’s postindian ethos, his insistence on Native presence over absence and after-image. It is quite another to alight on his performative virtuosity, that which has led him to speak of stepping round or across fixed categories of novel and short story and opt for what he terms “storying.” The point is not to indulge some mere formalist account but to establish how storying as a poetics, *a modus operandi*, operates at one with the vision in play in each of these texts.

KLAUS LÖSCH

University of Erlangen-Nürnberg

Otherness in Gerold Vizenor’s *Blue Ravens*

In Gerald Vizenor’s 2014-novel *Blue Ravens*, the protagonists are two brothers, one of them a painter, one a storer. On their multiple journeys starting from the White Earth reservation, the protagonists encounter various forms or configurations of otherness which offer a broad spectrum of (in part) hazardous ‘chances’ ranging from highly creative ones to utterly destructive ones. On the level of plot, the brothers deal with these forces mainly by way of their art, visual and verbal, respectively, and try to appropriate aspects of that otherness or else to control it. As exemplary characters of what Gerald Vizenor has termed survivance, i.e. an active native presence, they resist the various interpellations they are subjected to along the way. On the textual level, these two characters are being inscribed into the history of modernism in painting and literature, thus carving out a native presence against the backdrop of native absence created by modernist primitivism and its historiography. My paper focuses on the shifting meaning of otherness in the text with a side glance at the reception by multiple audiences. The guiding

question is whether the novel is capable of presenting (or at least evoking) the other as a presence and may thus be seen as partly suspending the dialectics of presence and absence.

SABINE N. MEYER
University of Osnabrueck

From Trail of Tears to *Chair of Tears*:
Postmodern Negotiations of the Indian Removal

Outlandish and playful, a combination of destruction and reverence (sometimes hard to tell apart), with humor and ambiguity the only constants, combining elements of irony, sarcasm, parody, comedy, satire, farce, and self-deprecating humor, this novel defies literary categorization. It is versatile, whimsical, uncomfortable, challenging, exploding in references and allusions; it's Vizenor at his best. (Orban 244)

This is a reviewer's recent and very fitting description of Gerald Vizenor's challenging and complex novel *Chair of Tears* (2012). The novel's most prominent allusion – indicated by its title – is to the Trail of Tears, the forced relocation of the southeastern tribes to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi in the 1830s. In my talk, I will read *Chair of Tears* as a postmodern negotiation of the Indian Removal and the legal debates that ensued in its wake. My analysis will attempt to decode the text's multi-layered references to various processes of removal, treaties, indigenous rights, Native sovereignty, as well as to Native vs. Anglo-American property regimes. Vizenor's novel reveals the intimacy of law and Native American literature. The law, as my reading will show, is an “indispensable but obscured text and context to an understanding of U.S. Native American oral and written expression” (Cheyfitz 8).

DAVID L. MOORE
University of Montana

The Ground of Memory:
Vizenor, Land, Language

Through comparative readings of Vizenor's language in the White Earth Constitution, his *Heirs of Columbus*, *Trickster of Liberty*, and *Dead Voices*, plus some of his nonfiction/theory in *Manifest Manners*, this paper traces linkages between the land and memory, and further clarifies how those linkages are the circulatory system of survivance.

Starting with “panic holes” as a dramatic entry into that grounded system, the discussion also employs theoretical lenses from Indigenous studies (Kevin Bruyneel, Vine Deloria, Jr., Kathryn Shanley); from ecofeminist materialism (Joni Adamson, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Deborah Rose Bird); and in linguistic phenomenology (David Abram, Maurice Merleau-Ponty) toward reformulations of mind as a field in conversation with quantum physics (Barad again, plus Bruce Rosenblum and Fred Kuttner).

These critics help to map consciousness and animism as “processes of self-organization” in an ecosystem, a constitution, a novel, or a people, where the trickster energy of boundary crossing is a constant “rage for order” or “rage for re-order” always seeking further organizational – hence animate/conscious/compassionate, i.e., connected – potentials.

This dynamic of fluid order in consciousness gets at the aesthetic and ethical “vein” that Vizenor opened in launching trickster discourse. He found an energetic flow between order and re-ordering, hence the prolific output of trickster discourse, which is always replaying, mapping, expressing itself.

By that self-organizing principle, that morphogenetic field (in Rupert Sheldrake’s term), every word is a microcosm of the macrocosm, a signifier in and of a discursive system (e.g., especially Vizenor’s neologisms). Each sentence, imbued with this internal process of self-organization, of the trickster’s trick, the principle of de-centering and re-organizing, is a stem cell from which the entire discursive project may radiate.

Thus, with each part containing the whole, each part remembers it all. That is the poetics: how trickster language/ discourse embodies memory structurally.

As to the hermeneutics, interpreting the message in that embodiment, a message of order that similarly repeats and reorders itself in every word, we may read how Vizenor reminds the reader of the land, the basis of the language and the law of tribal sovereignty.

WANDA NANIBUSH

Toronto

Postindian Anishinaabeg ‘Sovereignty’ in the work of Gerald Vizenor

What does Vizenor's experimentation in literature, where chance and postindian identities challenge static conceptions of tradition and stereotypical ideas on and the identifications of Indigenous Peoples, have to do with his work writing the constitution of White Earth? This talk points out towards a postindian Anishinaabe 'sovereignty' that challenges contemporary notions of tradition and rewrites the meanings of and the relation between sovereignty and culture. In weaving fiction and political action together the divide between these two spheres becomes less clear and their interpenetrations are liberated.

ALLAN J. RYAN

Carleton University, Ottawa

Trickster Discourse in *Narrative Chance*: How Gerald Vizenor Helped Shape My Life in Academia

As a doctoral student in Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in the early 1990s, and just beginning research on humor in the work of contemporary Native American and Canadian First Nations artists, I chanced upon the book *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, edited by Gerald Vizenor. It was a serendipitous, even fateful discovery, as pivotal an example of narrative chance in my own life as his father Clement Vizenor’s chance resemblance to matinee idol George Raft was in Gerald Vizenor’s life. The final chapter in this book, written by Vizenor, explored the concept of “trickster discourse.” I subsequently framed my dissertation as a trickster discourse, a spirited

conversation by and about a new generation of indigenous visual artists who, as “compassionate tricksters” (another key Vizenor concept), employed humor and irony and serious play to reimagine Native American experience in the past, present and future. UBC Press and the University of Washington Press later published the dissertation as a book titled *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*. Gerald Vizenor wrote a very generous endorsement for the dust jacket, and was later instrumental in the book receiving an American Book Award – the same award that Gerald received for *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*. I was deeply honoured. In the wake of the book’s success, I was offered the position of New Sun Chair in Aboriginal Art and Culture at Carleton University in Ottawa, where, for the past thirteen years I have been teaching in the School of Canadian Studies and the Department of Art History, and where I host an annual conference on aboriginal arts. At the 9th annual conference in 2010 I had the great pleasure of presenting Gerald Vizenor, the most compassionate trickster I know. This presentation will trace Gerald Vizenor’s impact and influence on my teaching and research over the last two decades.

KATHRYN SHANLEY
University of Montana

Universal Peculiarities in Gerald Vizenor’s
Heirs of Columbus and *Shoud of White Earth*

In these two novels, written decades apart, we see a common theme around how to heal from the history of colonial oppression; moreover, how to resist believing and recreating histories that do not heal. All is done through command of the story of the nature of the world – the universals that unite living things. In *Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor examines and revises the legacy of myth-making around Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of North America, first, by making Columbus a “Native” son (Mayan), and second, by setting his heirs on a healing course that takes them into science as well as back to Europe. A predominant image motif around the color blue signals the sacred power of healing in ways that force readers to embark on a “cross-blood-cultural” journey, equal to “discovering” a new land.

Similarly, in *Shrouds of White Earth*, Vizenor develops the idea of the palimpsest of history through the traces of past life recorded on shrouds; haunting in universally remarkable ways, artifacts bear the marks of the life that has gone before us, yet that life remains with us. Representation in the ceremonial sense of time displaces the idea of anthropocentric dominance as the protagonist struggles against the mean forces of social oppression, and ultimately the narrative asserts the idea that the souls of animals equally sacred as the soul of Jesus. Visual senses guide readers as healing light in this novel as well. In this paper I compare these two novels through their employment of tropes of healing that are both peculiar in a tricksterish way and, at the same time, evocative of universal symbolism.

BILLY J. STRATTON
University of Denver

“Nothing more than the chance of remembrance.”
Gerald Vizenor and the Motion of Natural Reason in the Presence of War.

This presentation will explore the philosophical confluence of Vizenor’s conceptions of “native motion” and “natural reason” as a means of making sense of the horror and folly of war in his works *Blue Ravens* and *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57*. In both works, readers find Native characters that address the absurdities of war, and the legacy of colonialism, with a keen sense of irony and what he calls a “visionary sense of native presence.” In the above-cited works, these touchstones of survivance are manifested in the trickster hermeneutics of Ronin Browne who disrupts the “simulations of peace” at Hiroshima’s Atomic Bomb Dome, while the stories of Basile and Aloysius Beaulieu combine to form a new historical memory of World War I Europe. In both novels Vizenor continues the project that forms the basis of novels such as *The Heirs of Columbus* in which Native people renounce the fugitive poses perpetuated by the literature of dominance and nostalgic victimry.

GERALD VIZENOR
University of California, Berkeley / University of New Mexico

Literary Transmotion

Native literary transmotion is directly related to the practice of survivance, a concept that is derived from relative observations of motion and action in Native American languages, art, and literature. The concept is a resistance to the crafty ideologies of nationalism, ethnographic models, dummies, and simulations, or gossip theory. The visionary stories of creation are instances of literary transmotion, and the continuous variations of the origin stories create a distinct sense of presence and survivance.

CATHY COVELL WAEGNER
University of Siegen

Gerald Vizenor’s Shimmering Birds in Dialog:
(De-)Framing, Memory, and the Totemic in
Favor of Crows and *Blue Ravens*

At first glance Gerald Vizenor’s two most recent book-length publications - *Favor of Crows: New and Collected Haiku* and *Blue Ravens: Historical Novel*¹ – appear to be disparate projects: a collection of delicate haiku with a learned introduction focusing on Japanese masters, and a historical novel with devastating scenes of World War I combat and protagonists who join the

“Lost Generation.” The two works speak to each other in complex ways, however, starting with the totemic birds in the titles and the arresting cover graphics by Indigenous artist Rick Bartow. Vizenor’s journey as a post-World War II army recruit from his White Earth home territory to the west – indeed so far west that he ended up across the Pacific in the Far East of Japan – radically diverges from, yet also parallels his relatives’ earlier path from the reservation to the east, as soldiers across the Atlantic to the battlefields of World War I France. In Japan Vizenor discovered the transience and timelessness of haiku poetry, and in France the two protagonists become artists of word and color in the burgeoning Modernist movement.

The deep common source of the two journeys and the art they produce is the rich *anishinaabe* culture and its cultural memory, its modes of animism, its dream songs, its inherited and ever-changing stories, to name but a few elements. Using components from recent discursive framing theory,² I will show how the shiny Ojibwe crows, the “first to come,”³ which fly and caw through the haiku pages, are dynamically framed in moments of evanescence and significance in the individual poems, whereas the giant blue ravens with their “totemic motion,”⁴ dazzlingly painted by Aloysius on cobblestones, streetcars, train depots, and bridges, burst the frames usually enclosing artistic paintings and soar off the pages of the novel, bearing their cultural meanings to an international audience recalling World War I a century later. In both cases minimalization and deliberate repetition serve expansive creativity. The ‘snapshot’ ephemerality of the haiku nature scenes is distortedly echoed in the destruction of nature recorded in the *Blue Ravens* narrator’s lyrically grotesque descriptions of war damage to the French countryside. The two works are profoundly informed by Vizenor’s influential semiotics of native discourse.

In the introduction to *Favor of Crows*, Gerald Vizenor moving tells his readers what value the haiku have for him: “I may never know if my haiku are right by nature, only that the scenes are my best memories.” The personal, cultural, and visionary memories encoded in the intertextuality of his two latest books find their place in the reader’s repertoire of “best memories” as well.

¹ Both works were published by Wesleyan University Press in February 2014.

² Richard Andrews (*A Theory of Contemporary Rhetoric*, New York: Routledge, 2014) presents a new approach to framing as an artistic device.

³ This quotation is from White Earth member Henry Selkirk’s reworking of an *anishinaabe* dream song, probably in the first decade of the 20th century, the time when the protagonists of *Blue Ravens* were growing up on the reservation. Selkirk’s poem is one of the epigraphs of *Favor of Crows*.

⁴ Gerald Vizenor, *Blue Ravens: Historical Novel*, 151.