

AESTHETICS OF OPPOSITION: THE POLITICS OF METAMORPHOSIS IN GERALD VIZENOR'S *BEARHEART*

Seyed Mohammad Marandi

University of Tehran

Mohsen Hanif

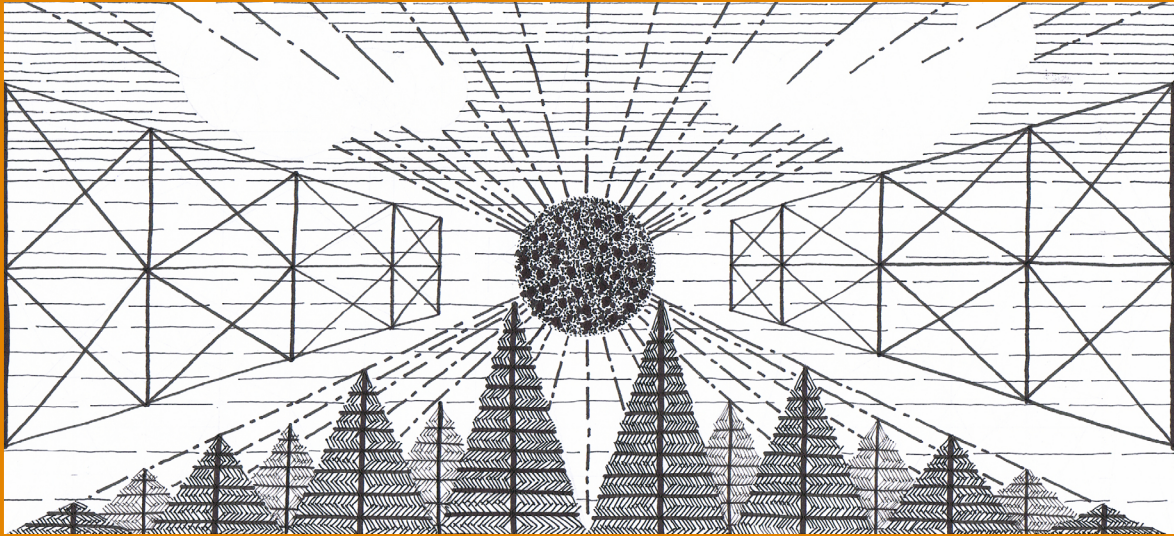
Kharazmi University

Recommended citation || MARANDI, Seyed Mohammad; HANIF, Mohsen (2014): "Aesthetics of Opposition: the Politics of Metamorphosis in Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart*" [online article], 452°F. *Electronic journal of theory of literature and comparative literature*, 11, 142-160, [Consulted on: dd/mm/aa], <http://www.452f.com/pdf/numero11/11_452f-mis-marandi-hanif-orgnl.pdf>

Illustration || Hugo Guinea Marca

Article || Received on: 03/10/2013 | International Advisory Board's suitability: 12/05/2014 | Published: 07/2014

License || Creative Commons Attribution Published -Non commercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.



Abstract || The Chippewa novelist Gerald Vizenor puts across his interconnected politico-philosophical notions of “survivance” and “terminal creeds” in his early novel, *Bearheart*. To do so, Vizenor implemented some of the aesthetic strategies of magical realism. He filled his novel with an excessive amount of bizarrely sexual and violent scenes—which turn out to be magical—in order to “upset” the established standards of normality. Moreover, he used American Indian mythic folktales of transformation and metamorphosis, a magical realist technique, to re-shape the cultural and tribal identity in *Bearheart*’s modernized context.

Keywords || Gerald Vizenor | *Bearheart* | Survivance | Terminal creeds | Magical realism | Metamorphosis.

*"We have walked backward in your time."
"How Backward?"
"Walking forward but seeing backward... Seeing
in time what we invent in passing... Birds and
animals see behind their motion. Place and time
lives in them not between them. Place is not an
invention of time, Place is a state of mind, place
is not notched measuring stick from memories
here to there..."*
(*Bearheart*, 238)

0. Introduction

Gerald Robert Vizenor (born 1934) is a prolific Native American writer who has published numerous volumes of poetry and novels, as well as some monographs on tribal histories and literary criticism. His first novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), later revised as *Bearheart: the Heirship Chronicles* (1990), brought him fame. His texts are brimming with puns, wordplay, and wild imagination in the tradition of a tribal trickster.

Heavily influenced by post-structuralism, Vizenor incorporates theories and ideas developed by philosophers such as Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard into the corpus of his works. His fiction is playful and full of allusions and humour, though it always remains serious with regard to the state of Native Americans. By dint of postmodern and poststructuralist theories, he endeavours to challenge the romanticized representation of Native Americans and constantly insinuates that "Indian" was a European invention and there was no such monolithic thing as an "Indian"—there were only peoples of various tribes before the Europeans dropped their anchors on the American shores. Following this frame of mind, much of his writing avoids the tendency towards anthropological representation of Native American cultures; instead, he takes up oral narratives that most significantly call attention to transformation, helping to keep the concepts of native-ness and Indian-ness elusive and always on the verge of developing, but never fully present.

Moreover, Vizenor dexterously blends the natural with the supernatural phenomena in his fiction, in order to question the realism of the social sciences (Benito, Manzanos and Simal 2009: 101). Vizenor notes that his interest in the reconciliation of opposites is rooted in the native Indian tribal belief system that avoids "terminal creeds" and celebrates "survivance". In an interview, Vizenor says:

The religious attitude among most tribal cultures here is one of balance rather than annihilation, in contrast to the interest of the blest to illuminate and annihilate evil. The Christian objective is to rid the self and the soul, the family, and the community, of evil, to isolate it and

destroy it. It's a war, a holy war to end evil. The same language is a part of American consciousness – the war on poverty, the war against ignorance. The objective is completely to end and destroy it. But the experience expressed in tribal culture is not that complete elimination or annihilation of anything. It's a balance, not a terminal creed. The balance is a resolution which grows out of trickeries, of outwitting, or the modulation of experience. It may grow out of origin myths themselves, that the balance was present at the time of creation. Those origin myths are still structurally and functionally a part of belief in tribal culture, the idea that life is not created by a patriarch but [through] a balance of male and female, an androgynous balance. The restoration of balance is present at all spiritual activities. (Bowers, Silet and Vizenor 1981: 43-44)

This idea is evident in *Bearheart*, which deals with “terminal creeds” and the survivance of the American Indians. Louis Owens explains that the terminal creeds represented in *Bearheart* refer to beliefs that aim to impose static definitions on the world. According to Owens, Vizenor is highly critical of static definitions, no matter whether they arise from the supposedly «traditional» Indian convictions or Euro-American ideologies. Terminal creeds are comparable to what Bakhtin calls «authoritative discourse,» which is the language «indissolubly fused with its authority” that has political power and has a prior validity (Owens 1992: 231). Benito, Manzanos and Simal define terminal creeds as “a symbolic haven, even if an illusory one, of full meaning and presence, one that most people turn to in moments of tension and chaos” (2009: 97). “Economic power had become the religion of the nation;” *Bearheart* notes, “when it failed, people turned to their own violence and bizarre terminal creeds for comfort and meaning” (Vizenor 1990: 23).

On the other hand, survivance—which is the portmanteau of survival and resistance to cultural domination—points to the way heroes survive and show resistance to nihilism, “manifest destiny” and the typical depiction of Native Americans as victims (Vizenor 2009: 24-25). “Native survivance”, Vizenor observes, “is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent” (2009: 85). To survive the outrage of Americanization, Kimberly Blaeser contends, Vizenor’s surviving protagonists “examine, question, shift, stretch, bend, change, grow, juggle, balance, and sometimes duck—for surviving doesn’t necessarily mean winning [...] Survival is achieved, according to Vizenor, through humor and story (1996: 63).

Vizenor’s main contribution to postcolonial discourse, according to Shackleton, is his idea of “trickster hermeneutics”; which is cultural survival and resistance to stereotypical representation of Native Americans (2001: 70). Accordingly, Vizenor’s works are politically committed since they intend to stand out against the central discourses in textual and extra-textual worlds. Moreover, Vizenor strongly believes that there is a singular native aesthetic that assists

him on the path of literary survivance. He writes:

I strongly disagree, in other words, with the spurious notion that there is no singular native aesthetics. Consider, for instance, the ancestral storiers who created animal characters with a tricky sense of consciousness, the natural reason of a native aesthetics of survivance. Many contemporary native novelists present the imagic consciousness of animals in dialogue and descriptive narratives, and overturn the monotheistic separation of humans and animals. (2009: 9-10)

In *Bearheart*, Vizenor has incorporated what he defines as the “imagic consciousness of animals in dialogue and descriptive narratives,” too. He not only makes seven crows and two dogs accompany the pilgrims on their journey, but also represents the animals—especially the crows—as tricksters.

Oral American Indian folktales present ravens and crows as native tricksters (2009: 13). The crows that accompany the pilgrims on their journey in *Bearheart* are examples of native tricksters (Rigal-Cellard 1997: 99). In addition, Vizenor makes his protagonist transform into a bear—the animal that signifies strength, spiritual wisdom and shamanic power in Chippewa folklore (1997: 99). Proudé Cederfair, the protagonist who metamorphoses into a bear, can magically move from one place to another, and, when overcome by despair, he metamorphoses into a bear and “soars” back to his cedar circus to swim in the lake of the migis. He is an avatar of the trickster Nanabozho. In general, Gerald Vizenor makes animals, birds and humans accompany each other because he postulates that Native American cosmology, unlike monotheistic creation, does not separate them in either nature or literature. This union, according to Vizenor, forms a part of native aesthetics (2009: 14).

Although Vizenor believes in a unique native aesthetic, he underlines the fluidity of native culture and aesthetics; a conviction which made him suspicious of the American Indian Movement after 1960. He posits that the leaders of this movement reinforced stereotypes and wrongly fostered the illusion of an authentic tribal identity that was further sustained by the media (1994: 150). Vizenor sensibly confesses that though for a time he regarded himself as a mediator and an Indian voice, he no longer represents Native Americans. He admits he does not stand for any specific group but functions as an “upsetter” who strives to overturn terminal creeds (Bowers, Silet and Vizenor 1981: 45).

In *Bearheart*, Vizenor focuses on the motif of exile and recounts how a group of Native Americans and mixed-bloods accompanied by seven clown crows and two dogs embark on a pilgrimage across the United States in search of the “fourth world”. “In the fourth world,” Proudé Cederfair, the protagonist and the narrator, explains, “evil spirits are

outwitted in the secret languages of animals and birds. Bears and crows choose the new singers. The crows crow in their blackness” (1990: 5). As the novel progresses, the audience realizes that only the people who overcome “terminal creeds” can gain access to the utopian fourth world.

Vizenor’s unorthodox narrative tracks the adventures of the company in a post-apocalyptic American society. The entire country has run out of fuel—which may symbolize soul—and in order to survive, people would commit heinous criminal acts, such as cannibalism, without qualms. Their picaresque throughout the devastated white communities continues by car, boat, and on foot, and the characters gradually join Bearheart on his journey. The narrative reaches its turning point when the pilgrims meet “the evil gambler, the monarch of unleaded gasoline” who would “gamble for five gallons” and kill the losers (1990: 102-103). Structurally speaking, the chapters preceding the “evil gambler” show the accumulation of the pilgrims, and the chapters following the confrontation with the gambler depict the pilgrims’ demise and dissolution. From then on, the pilgrims fall victim to their own conceit, and the tighter a pilgrim holds to “terminal creeds,” the sooner he or she leaves the group or dies. However, they experience both tragic and comedic moments on their journey.

Vizenor’s pilgrims are stubbornly libidinal and ludicrous. Alan R. Velie claims that *Bearheart* lacks “philosophical and aesthetic depth” and symbolism (1982: 136-137). Contrary to Velie, Rigel-Cellard compares different scenes in *Bearheart* with parallel incidents in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and observes that Vizenor loads the text with thick symbolism in order to create a postmodern parody (1997: 110). She states:

By producing this Native *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a manifesto which is his own version of the canonical novel written according to the Bible, by tossing it upside down, by hiding wisdom under the most foolish of attires, Vizenor is asserting the spiritual freedom of his tribal people, even after their political power has been smothered by generations of colonists brandishing the Bible and poor Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. (1997: 112)

Moreover, in its radical presentation of sex and violence, *Bearheart* employs postmodern narrative strategies, but at the same time is considered one of the “most traditional of Native American novels” because of its extensive use of Chippewa oral tradition (Vizenor 1989: 143). The novel bears the marks of the oil embargo of the early seventies that led the Federal Government to collapse, causing the confiscation of the Native American reservations (Rigel-Cellard 1997: 94-5). The book, on a philosophical level, intends to divulge the “terminal creeds” of the Americans Indians as much as those of the central government and the whites. This is easily noticed in “The Letter to the Reader” written by Vizenor (under the pseudonym

Bearheart) at the beginning of the novel. In this letter, Vizenor denounces both the Federal Government, which “held their [tribal people’s] reservation land in trust so the timber could be cut and minerals mined” (1990: xii); and the disciples of the American Indian Movement, who wear “plastic bear claws” and whose religion is just “a word pile” (1990: x).

In addition, the thematic question “what does Indian mean?” runs through *Bearheart*, and the novel violently resists (and considers terminal creed) any preconceived definition of Indian-ness that does not embrace its opposite. For instance, Belladonna’s racist comments in favour of native blood, Little Big Mouse’s “grotesque and patronizing liberality,” and her unreasonable big-heartedness, Bishop Parasimo’s obsession “with the romantic and spiritual power of tribal people” (1990: 75), which Louis Owen interprets as “the Hollywood version of Indianness” (Owens 1990: 250) are some of the examples of terminal creeds. By the same token, although Judge Pardone Cozener and Doctor Wilde prefer to remain in the “word hospital” and thus escape the tragic fate of the majority of the pilgrims, Maureen Keady interprets “their decision to stay there [as] clearly a choice of nihilism” (1985: 64). That is, by remaining stagnant and avoiding the playfulness of the Native Indian culture, they bring about their own intellectual death.

Moreover, as Keady observes, “those who cling to words as evidence of existence will be unable to enter [‘the fourth world’]. In wasted and poisoned America, ‘survival of the fittest’ prevails, but Vizenor points out that, here, as always, it is spiritual strength that makes one fit” (1985: 65). Certainly, *Bearheart* is both a tale about the end of the world and the beginning of a new one. Vizenor celebrates tricksters’ ways of walking backward, which symbolizes the re-initiation of a time when myth was at the centre of meaning, and “oral tradition is honoured” (1990: 163). To this end, Gerald Vizenor implements techniques and elements of magical realism and incorporates magical scenes in *Bearheart*.

What follows is a discussion of the politics of magical realism in *Bearheart*. First, we will argue that Vizenor constantly draws his audience’s attention to excessive representation of surreal sexual and violent scenes in order to “upset”—in Vizenor’s terminology—the longstanding unquestioned benchmarks of normality. Second, we will discuss how American Indian mythic folktales and figures, especially the trickster Nanabozho and great gambler, who possess magical powers, function within the modernized and pseudo-realistic context of *Bearheart* to help reshape cultural and tribal identity. Finally, we will elaborate on the metamorphic nature of tricksters, which is a strategy employed for survivance in *Bearheart*.

1. The Magic of Excess

As a magical realist text, *Bearheart* exploits many representational modes of classical realism, but undermines its humanist premises. Vizenor's debut violates the humanist idea of humankind's innate civility and rationality. Without intending to create any sense of horror in the mind of its fictional characters, Vizenor in *Bearheart* presents a shocking picture of the world as if extremely violent acts were ordinary occurrences. *Bearheart* is full of illogical, irrational, and indecent incidents; offensive and rude words are constantly uttered, sex and violence are graphically portrayed, and nonsensical actions are repeatedly reported. Violence turns out to be among the people's most pleasurable hobbies in *Bearheart*. "As it turned out killing gave me a whole lot of pleasure then" evil gambler confesses,

My business has been to bring people to their death. Until I was nineteen suffocation fascinated me as a form of death. Like an artist I practiced the various means of suffocating people. Later I was attracted to traps and poisons ... secrets and surprises on the road to death. (1990: 126)

Likewise, after a "whitecannibal" kills and butchers two pedestrians, he "picked up the steaming heart from the dead whiteman and threw it across the road toward the circus pilgrims" (1990: 174-175). Vizenor explains the initial reactions of each one of the pilgrims as such:

Neither the seven crows, nor the dogs, nor the nine circus pilgrims moved from their places. Eighteen pairs of eyes focused on the heart. Sun Bear Sun imagined the smell of cooking meat until digestive saliva filled his huge mouth. Matchi Makwa would feed it to the animals. Belladonna turned from the heart in tears fearful of evil fixations. Parawoman Pio was fighting back the powerful savage urge to devour the heart raw. He could taste the blood salts and feel the soft muscles slipping between his massive teeth. He swallowed. Proude thought about the death of his fathers and the spiritual power from the hearts of animals. (1990: 175)

Although the pilgrims seem hesitant about feeding on the heart of a just-killed human being, some of them soon change their minds. Vizenor explains:

Pio moaned and his mammoth limbs trembled. Sun Bear Sun swallowed and in slow measured steps he walked across the road and talked to the whiteman with the knife. The man paused and then handed Sun Bear Sun a large piece of dried meat. When he returned, he explained that the meat was from the biceps of a young woman who had been raped and killed for flesh the month before on the interstate. The meat was prepared. The circus pilgrims were silent. Proude and Inawa Biwide and Rosina and Belladonna and Perfect Crow and Pure Gumption would not eat human flesh. Private Jones and six crows pecked and pulled at the steaming heart. (1990: 175)

This exemplifies the profusion of excessive violence and grotesquery

in the novel. Theoretically speaking, one way a literary work shows resistance to the dominant literary forms is through the strategy of “excess”. One type of excess is to overload the narrative with deformity and nudity and the transgression of “polite” language. *Bearheart* is replete with explicit descriptions of strange sexual encounters (e.g. see: xiv, 30, 45, 70, 95, 124, 180) and extremely violent actions which involve detailed description of deformities (e.g. see: 54, 87, 126, 135, 138, 140, 151, 174, 176, 232, 239). In addition, along with disrupting social norms, the subversion of norms manifests itself in characters’ and the novelist’s plays on words (e.g. playing with ‘hairship’ and ‘heirship’, ‘word war’ and ‘world war’, etc.). These deviations, in fact, show a radical reaction to mainstream realist presentations. The uncommon representations in *Bearheart* intentionally thwart the readers’ notions of morality. This is what Blaeser calls the “strategy of liberation”. She writes:

The impetus in Vizenor’s work is exactly that of checking the process of annihilation and freeing Native American identity from the grasp of literary colonialism. He does this both by struggling against established literary and linguistic structures, practices, and images, and by working to create new ones. By undermining the colonial “strategies of containment” and replacing them with the strategies of liberation.” (Blaeser 1996: 73)

Formal realism tends to perpetuate the rules of the dominating power in the society and contain the desires of the masses. A “bizarre” text like Vizenor’s *Bearheart* employs “strategies of liberation” to release its audiences of the constraints of the dominating power. As Felix Guattari notes:

The masses certainly do not passively submit to power; nor do they «want» to be repressed, in a kind of masochistic hysteria; nor are they tricked by an ideological lure. Desire is never separable from complex assemblages that necessarily tie into molecular levels, from micro formations already shaping postures, attitudes, perceptions, expectations, semiotic systems, etc. Desire is never an undifferentiated instinctual energy, but itself results from a highly developed, engineered setup rich in interactions: a whole supple segmentarity that processes molecular energies and potentially gives desire a fascist determination. (Guattari 1987: 215)

According to Guattari, the ruling power does not take advantage of overt ideological dicta to coerce people into assent and compliance, but controls their psyche and their power of desire by creating a system of guilt. By setting norms, traditional realism functions as an accomplice in establishing a system of guilt. Vizenor intends to upset the norms of the so-called prudent American society by transgressing moral and ethical boundaries.

According to Blaeser, suggestive language, transformations, and identification with nature are a few of the violated social norms (1996:

184). Bakhtin hails the literary approaches that intend “to destroy and rebuild the entire false picture of the world, to sunder the false hierarchical links between objects and ideas, to abolish the divisive ideational strata” (1981: 169). According to McClure, Bakhtin’s “false hierarchal links” are identical to the official, authoritative discourses that Vizenor calls terminal creeds (1997: 56). Magical realism with an excess of unusual narratives subverts the dominant norms, which have always feared the intrusion of the other. As a result, magical realism both violates and suppresses the philosophical or political “other”.

Although Vizenor illustrates excessive violent scenes in *Bearheart*, he attempts to put them on a normal footing for the audience. In this way, he follows up a strategy of banal representation of grotesquery and violence in *Bearheart*. According to Bakhtin, grotesque, which is “an aesthetic of the unfinished”, appears to challenge the classical standards (1966: 32-33). In *Bearheart*, the character Rosina best expresses the indifference of the pilgrims towards the horrific incidents on their journey. When one of the “penarchical pensioners” in the ghost city feels shocked after Rosina bluntly explains how Matchi Makwa and one of the witches were beheaded and his head arrived on the end of a stick carried by Sun Bear Sun, Rosina says:

Not so strange when you think about some of the things we had seen, [...] we have been walking from the cedar nation for more than two months now and there has been violence and death ... Death and whitepeople punishing and killing each other for no reason ... So when the head of the witch came back on a stick we never thought much about it ... (1990: 225-226)

As in *Bearheart*, magical realist texts occasionally show no reaction and use a neutral language when they represent preternatural acts of violence. This is what Hegerfeldt calls “the rhetoric of banality” which highlights “the absurd, nonsensical, fantastic nature of reality” (2005: 209). Additionally, Timothy Brennan dubs this disinterested portrayal of horrors “the stylistic veneer of [...] matter-of-fact violence” (1989: 66). By dint of the rhetoric of banality, the magical realist text de-installs the realist world-view it relies on. However, it merges the discrepancy between the humanist ideals of civility and progress and the state of the world, albeit not to downgrade the former but to indict the latter.

Conversely, in some scenic moments, Vizenor pushes banal and tedious phenomena to the centre of attention and depicts them as magical and eerie. This is what Hegerfeldt calls “the supernaturalization of the extratextual world” (2005: 199). As a case in point, Bigfoot relates that he is in love with a bronze statue of a woman he stole from a public park. The statue which the pedestrians

in the park disregarded and found absolutely dull Bigfoot thought so animated that when he found his rival had stolen the statue Bigfoot kills the thief to get the statue back (1990: 85-88). He just receives two years of house arrest for the crime because the “judicial folks were downright pleased to meet an old fashioned passion killer, a killer who made sense, because most of the killings going on are reasonless now random living and random loving and random death” (1990: 83). Having told the story of the bronze statue, Bigfoot begins to dance with her and Little Big Mouse whispers “she has warmed to my touch” after she strokes the statue (88). Vizenor, in fact, builds such a fabulous aura of mystery around a very simple and ordinary park statue that not only Bigfoot but also the rest of the characters fall for Bigfoot’s tale.

Vizenor, on the other hand, depicts plausible incidents as if they were fantastic. “The fantastic elements are not restricted to what by rational-empirical criteria is considered physically impossible,” Hegerfeldt maintains, “highly improbable events can have a similar effect.” (2005: 79). Although events such as the shortage of gasoline, beating the evil gambler in consecutive rounds (1990:123), and a parade of cripples (Vizenor 1990:145), are not beyond natural law, they strike the reader as fantastic because of their high improbability.

In brief, while Vizenor describes violent scenes in *Bearheart*, he attempts to normalize them both for the characters and the audience. Besides, Vizenor illustrates the probable phenomena as if their occurrence is fantastic and supernatural. In general, through these strategies Vizenor violates humanist claims to innate civility and rationality of humanity in order to present an appalling picture of the world, not to undermine the humanist ideals but to grieve over the state of the world, past and present.

2. “Walking Forward but Seeing Backward”; the Marriage between *Mythos* and *Logos*

Magical realist texts typically discuss the mythic past of a nation, and Vizenor’s *Bearheart* is no exception. According to Moses Valdez, however, an overemphasis on nostalgia in some magical realist fiction erases or ignores bad memories and offers “purely symbolic or token resistance to the inexorable triumph of modernity” (2001: 106). Contrary to Valdez’s argument, Windy B. Faris asserts that magical realism presents more than mere “token resistance”. As she says, a magical realist text may work in the technological and different modes of scientific progress to prevent its readers from indulging in “nostalgic return to a vanished past” (2002: 114-115). To that end, Gerald Vizenor avoids exonerating the Indians from their

own misdemeanours that led to their degeneration. He accuses the pan-tribal people for tightly adhering to their terminal creeds, which are nothing but “word piles” (1990: x). Also, when more people are attracted to the cedar nation, where holy cedar incense was produced, Vizenor laments:

Tribal religions were becoming more ritualistic but without visions. The crazed and alienated were desperate for terminal creeds to give their vacuous lives meaning. Hundreds of tribal people came to the cedar nation for spiritual guidance. They camped for a few days, lusted after their women in the cedar, and then, lacking inner discipline, dreams, and personal responsibilities, moved on to find new word wars and new ideas to fill their pantribal urban emptiness. (1990: 16)

Vizenor targets the logocentrism of the modern world in “Biavaricious word hospital” where the dreams are “words words words...” and meaning is always present (1990:160). There, Vizenor, parodies Chomsky’s “generative grammar” with what is called “degenerative grammar”, and thereby targets science and its pretensions to precision (1990:167). Justice Pardone and Doctor Wilde, two of the pilgrims who believe “words are the meaning of living now ... The word is where the word is at now”, find out that the “word hospital” is their “last chance to be part of the real word” (1990:170-171).

Authors who are generally recognized as magical realists generally refrain from giving superiority to *mythos* over *logos*, but present them as two basic modes of knowledge production, which are simultaneous and complementary (Hegerfeldt 2005: 188). Therefore, all the pilgrims except for two prefer to leave the “word paradise”, where the *logos* and aspiration for exactness reign, rather than *mythos*, which stresses on the playfulness of language (1990: 163). Yet, Jean-Francois Lyotard maintains that scientific language is as much the creation of some language games as other types of knowledge, albeit with different rules. Overemphasizing scientific paradigms and evaluating other fields of knowledge based on scientific rules, according to Lyotard, has led to cultural imperialism throughout the last centuries (1984: 26-27). Scientific discourse, in other words, is as playful and metaphoric as other narrative modes; the difference is that the former does not acknowledge its interest. In fact, Vizenor applies scientific jargon and methods to a ridiculously unlikely situation to mock scientific pretensions to impartiality and to disclose how methodical paradigms function in complicity with the authority. More to the point, as one of the sociologists in the “word hospital” suggests, scientific advancement increases at the cost of the devastation of marginalized peoples and cultures. He states that the government funds their investigations and, ironically, built two of the word hospitals on the ruins of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The sociologist explains to the pilgrims:

The government discovered that there was something wrong with our language. The breakdown in law and order, the desecration of institutions, the hardhearted investigations, but most of all the breakdown in traditional families was a breakdown in communication ... This caused our elected officials to create this word hospital and eight others in the nation ... Six of them are new buildings like this one, while two were created in the ruins of the old Bureau of Indian Affairs field offices [...] The bureau records were included in our analysis of language [...] the language of the bureau had nothing whatever to do with the reason for its existence. (166)

NOTES

1 | Brief production histories are provided by Clifford (2012), Johnston (2007) and Edwards (2007, 1998).

The “word hospital” that propagates and promotes “word wars” is built on the ruins of the Bureaus of Indian Affairs. Vizenor, in other words, allegorically divulges the fake promises of such institutes and foundations, which claim to support the Native Indians cause.

Vizenor adds myths, fairy tales and fantastic stories to his allegorical diatribe of the modern life which, according to Hegerfeldt, is a technique for “expressing a truth too painful to tell directly” (2005: 193). Vizenor implements myth and magic to both paint a picture of the future and take a trip down memory lane. The character of the evil gambler, whom Vizenor borrowed from the same character in Chippewa mythology, embodies the elaborate hoax of capitalism.¹ The mythic character of the evil gambler—who appears this time in *Bearheart*, a doubly postmodern and postcolonial narrative—is the epitome of modern senselessness. His surrogate mother kidnapped him when he was playing around in a mall; and unsurprisingly, his natural mother did not realize his disappearance until a few hours later, when he was already far from the mall. He lived with other adopted children in a van driven by their adopted mother, and he and his brothers were not asked to respect any moral codes and were allowed to do whatever they wished, including incest and violence. Later in his life, the evil gambler expands a gasoline empire and claims that he possesses gasoline, which symbolizes spirit in *Bearheart*. But when Prude Cederfair wins him over in gambling, the gambler’s promise proves to be futile and vacuous. Hence, Vizenor’s novel in a sense is a secular allegory that anticipates the prospects of capitalism.

Vizenor remembers the past in his fiction; however, he does not memorialize it with nostalgia. Toward the end of *Bearheart*, he uses magical realism to remind his audience of the tragic memories of the witch-hunt trials and the false premise on which American Dream was based. When the pilgrims embark on the “freedom train to Santa Fe”, ironically some people, called pantribal pensioners, take them to a ghost city wherein the pilgrims are forced to work. As Prude Cederfair explains that, like their Puritan ancestors, the pantribal pensioners, “founded our new nation [...] and enforced high moral and ethical codes [...] Sorcerers and shamans and witches will be

punished for their crimes” (1990: 224). In the so-called promised journey, the members of the caravan have to appear in a court to be heard by the governors. The governors “ordered an inquisition into witchcraft and shamanism” and the pilgrims “were questioned, suspicions were confirmed, and charges of evil and diabolism were brought against the pilgrims” (1990: 225). The pilgrims are taken to the inquisition room one by one. Imprisoned in an adobe room, the rest of pilgrims, drinking some of “vision vine” that Bigfoot carries, transform into clown crows and escape from the prison. But before leaving the prison, while in the form of clown crows,

moving through the time of six generations the twelve clown crows were in the palace when the first wooded floors were laid in some of the rooms ... Figured calico covered the whitewashed walls ... The old vigas were replaced when a portion of the earthen roof dropped ... Governor Don Juan Francisco Trevino was discussing the charges against tribal sorcerers and idolaters ... Tribal people liberated the prisoners and spared the governor ... The twelve crows did not hear the governor tell that four tribal people had been hanged for their terminal creeds ... The twelve crows watched the flag of the United States unfurl for the first time in Santa Fe right now from the plaza benches on August 18, 1846. (1990: 234)

Vizenor makes his characters fly back in time to witness a real historical scene in 1675 in Santa Fe, when Governor Juan Francisco Trevino, a Spanish colonizer, charged forty-seven Pueblo medicine men with sorcery and sentenced all of them to death. The aforementioned passage also alludes to the American army general Stephen Watts Kearny, who occupied Santa Fe and raised the flag of America over the Plaza in August 18, 1846.² After this visionary visit to the past of their nation—which is bereft of any nostalgia—and a review of the horrific incidents of the witch-hunt and the conquest of Mexico, they find the way out of their adobe prison and escape. Believing that the “living holds the foolishness of the past” (1990: 218), Vizenor’s novel both cleverly delineates the miseries brought on by colonization and warns about their upshot in the future.

3. Entering the Fourth World as Bears; Tricky Transformations in *Bearheart*

The Native American narratives presented in *Bearheart* often tell of the bizarre transformation of human beings into animals, and children born out of the coupling of animals and humans. Moreover, Vizenor repeatedly describes the weird metamorphoses and the practice of uncommon couplings in minute detail. The classic function of metamorphosis is to represent the duality or fragmentation of identity, but in native narrative, Rigel-Cellard contends, only the results of such transformations and copulations matter (1997: 102). That is, they often

NOTES

2 | This article focuses on paperbacks because these are the editions most likely to be sold in commercial bookshops.

explain how the world came into being and how various creatures began to exist. Vizenor further fits metamorphic transformations into the modern narrative of the pilgrims. Rigel-Cellard claims that the types of metamorphoses presented in Vizenor's fiction are simply intended to amuse the audience. According to her, not all Chippewa transformations have a "serious didactic function", and thus most transformations in *Bearheart* are gratuitous and playful (1997:102). Contrary to Rigel-Cellard's argument, shape-shifting in *Bearheart* can be explained by the idea of survivance, which is best exemplified in the character of the trickster. As mentioned above, one of the central characteristics of native tricksters is that they adapt to social changes in order to survive and resist the dominant culture. Therefore, masks and guises, as used in *Bearheart*, play a fundamental role in defining a trickster's features.

For survivance, the trickster needs to shift between various systems of thought. Mask devices help to materialize this function. The trickster characters are shape-shifters, but they do not lose their identity (Shakleton, 2001: 72). The trickster is a shape-shifter who changes its guises and produces "a confluence of narratives" and, as Shackleton observes, "Perhaps nowhere else in the world are they so significant to a people's sense of self and identity—their past, present, and imagined future—as they are among Native North Americans" (2001: 82). Native Americans are presumably more prone to incorporate tricksters into their narratives than other ethnic minorities. This, in fact, unites various Native American communities.

The mythic quality associated with tricksters is comparable to the situation of the pilgrims wearing metamasks in *Bearheart*. Two of the pilgrims in *Bearheart*, namely the stoic Proude Cederfair and the vulgar Bigfoot, represent two different aspects of the Native trickster: a "culture hero and [a] clownish menace to the community" (2001: 72). Nonetheless, it is hardly possible to exclude the shape-shifting Bishop Parsamio with his three masks, and Pio, who wears metamasks of women to hide his/her identity, from the list of tricksters in *Bearheart*.

But most important is Proude Cederfair, a shaman, a conjurer and a trickster who connects to nature and animals. "The cedar became his source of personal power," the narrator tells us, "He dreamed trees and leaned in the wind with the cedar. In the winter he stood outside alone drawing his arms around his trunk under snow. He spoke with the trees. He became the cedar wood" (1990: 7); "He roared like a bear [...] He understood the language of cedar and learned to trust the voices of the crows. He became the rhythm of cedar trees and birds. Silence and language of animals gave him power (1990: 17). Moreover, the narrator notes that Proude "would be a clown [...] a compassionate trickster for the afternoon, a bear from the cedar"

(1990: 20).

However, when Proude turns into a bear to enter the “fourth world”, he is no longer a trickster. In spite of the fact that he is a trickster, Bigfoot cannot find the entrance into the fourth world. Vizenor seems to suggest that tricksters are not allowed to enter the mythic fourth world. This is because tricksters are essentially liminal figures and, as Jalalzai explains, they would fluctuate between two opposing systems so that they could not function in a static system like the utopian fourth world (Winter, 1999: 29). A trickster figure, quite similar to a postmodern narrative, using Lyotard’s term, manifests “incredulity towards metanarratives” (1984: xxiv). Similar to postmodern narratives, tricksters in Vizenor’s *Bearheart* share disrespect for metanarratives which Gerald Vizenor terms “terminal creeds”.

Elizabeth Blair remarks that not only Vizenor’s characters but also his text—that is *Bearheart*—enjoys tricksterian qualities. Like tricksters who seek to heal the age-old communal pains, “in trickster text, words heal by refusing to take themselves seriously” (1995: 88). Through its humour, *Bearheart* affects the audience’s emotions much more than their intellects. Although wordplay, grotesque and fantastic imagery, abnormal violent actions, and gratuitous explanations of sexual encounters seem inessential to the organic unity of the text, they are involved in making what Blair calls “text as trickster”. Mostly, a trickster narrative upsets the audience’s imagination by undermining, challenging, disclosing, and deconstructing fossilized notions and ideas, as well as the presumption that language is static and one-dimensional. Accordingly, McClure proposes that Vizenor’s notion of trickster discourse should be analysed within the linguistic discourse (1997: 51). Most significantly, he refers to the way the characters use language to destabilize the dominant discourse. In fact, Vizenor, uses tricksters as both fictional characters and formalistic textual techniques to (de)educate his readers by upsetting the normalized perspectives.

In addition to his metamorphic qualities, a trickster, Vizenor stresses, has a strong and often lewd sense of humour. He points out that “trickster stories heal the heart by native irony, humor, and by the images of survivance and sovereignty” (2009: 229). “Life is humor,” he continues in defence of his tricksterian way of representation and transformation, “life always has mysteries, beauty, chaos, elements of theatre, comedy, tragedy, and the tease of a trickster. My art is about life” (2009: 229).

Metamorphosis, however, invites diverse interpretations in various contexts. When a Kafkaesque narrative uses the device of metamorphosis, it presumably aims to reflect the alienation of the modern man. Alternatively, Toni Morrison resurrects a dead child

metamorphosed as Beloved, expecting to highlight the painful memories of slavery. In addition, Angel Asturias, as Christopher Warnes observes, uses metamorphosis in *Men of Maize* as a metonym to explain a segment of cultural beliefs (2009: 15). However, Gerald Vizenor underlines the playfulness of metamorphosis not for the sake of the audience's transitory delight, but to display and materialize the tricksters' psychological attempts to survive and avoid being crushed under the dominance of non-native cultural sovereignty.

A number of critics contend that one of the distinguishing roles of metamorphosis is to represent the multiple and fluid identities of the post-colonial world. Metamorphoses incorporated in magical realist texts reflect the highly porous borders of the self. These critics distinguish between two different types of identity as reflected in magical realist texts: "Either there is a proliferation of selves within one single identity, or else readers witness an individual becoming 'the other' she was looking at [...]" (Benito, Manzanos and Simal 2009: 165). *Bearheart*, according to this definition, is subsumed under the first category. Bishop Parasimo's metamasks stand for his triple identities. Whenever he or the other pilgrims wear any of the three metamasks, the narrator refers to them by the name of the metamask while they keep maintain the beliefs they had before wearing the metamasks. Matchi Makwa is a case in point. He was in love before he wore the metamask of a woman, yet when Matchi Makwa had to put on the metamask of Princess Gallroad to save the witches, he still feels the same sexually, even though the narrator uses the female pronoun to refer to Matchi Makwa. "Obsessed with her [Matchi Makwa's] lust," explains Bearheart, "She ran into the kitchen past the waiter and returned to the table with a sharp knife which she used to shave the hair from her crotch [...] breathless she [Matchi Makwa] turns her p... into her warmth evil" (Vizenor, 1990: 180). The same is true for all the men who wear the female metamasks. The pronoun changes to female for all them but their identity remains the same.

Furthermore, metamorphosis in *Bearheart* is a voluntary and celebratory phenomenon. Unlike Samsa who is involuntarily metamorphosed into a bug in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Vizenor not only celebrates the very nature of metamorphosis, but also lets the characters in *Bearheart* decide which metamask to wear and when to turn into an animal or a plant. Nonetheless, metamasks in *Bearheart* do not change the inner qualities of the characters who wear them. They simply help the characters first to hide their very identity (for example, when the pilgrims need to enter the food fascists' restaurant for the second time). They must hide their identity, and Matchi Makwa, Pio and bishop Parasimo wear each of the three metamasks randomly (1990: 179). Also, after Bishop Parasimo dies, Pio inherits his three metamasks, all of which are in the shape of women. Soon

after s/he wears them, Pio feels no longer embarrassed about her/his facial features that are dangling between that of a man and a woman. The metamasks “give him a good feeling about himself ... herself, she is much more interesting now with the metamasks. She talks all the time [...]” (1990: 226).

Nevertheless, Vizenor sometimes brings in metamorphic characters to allegorise the bleak situation of humankind. The pilgrims on the interstates come across a procession of cripples and scoliamas. Through them Vizenor demonstrates the horrific effects of chemicals on humankind and laments the artificial wings (of imagination and hope) that people attach to themselves to forget their miseries. The cripples, Bigfoot explains, “never developed past the memories of fish and animals in our human past...less than whole less than human.” Doctor Wilde continues, “Cripples are cripples from the chemicals their parents and grandparents drank and smoked and ate” (1990: 147). On the other hand, the moths are moths “to survive and escape [their] lives” through “imagination and visions” (1990: 149). In this section, Vizenor employs the crooked and the transformed to symbolize imperfect people imprisoned in their terminal creeds. “We become our memories and what we believe,” Proude says, “we become the terminal creeds we speak. Our words limit the animals we would become...soaring through words from memories and vision. We are all incomplete...imperfect. Lost limbs and lost visions stand with the same phantoms” (1990: 147).

Accordingly, Gerald Vizenor adopts the strategy of metamorphosis for three different purposes: first to metonymically demonstrate the interconnectedness of man with nature in Indian cosmology, as in the case of Proude turning to a bear; second, to symbolically show the path Native Americans must take for the survivance of their culture, as shown in the character of tricksters; and third, to metaphorically depict the false vision and the imperfection of humankind which led them to embrace terminal creeds.

Works cited

- BAKHTIN, M (1981): *The Dialogic Imagination*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P.
- BAKHTIN, M (1966): *Rabelais and His World (Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable, 1965)*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge: MA, and London.
- BENITO, J. MANZANAS, A. & SIMAL, B. (2009): *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literature*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.
- BLAESER, K.M. (1996): *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*. Norman: U of Oklahoma Press.
- BLAIR, E. (1995): "Text as Trickster: Postmodern Language Games in Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart*", *MELUS (Maskers and Tricksters)* 20, no. 4 (Winter): 75-90.
- BOWERS, N. SILET, C. & VIZENOR G. (1981): "An Interview with Gerald Vizenor." *Melus (Tention and Form)*, Spring: 41-49.
- BRENAN, T. (1989): *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*. London: St. Martin's Press.
- FARIS, W.B. (2002): "The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism." *Janus Head* 5, no. 2: 101-124.
- DELEUZE, G., GUATTARI F. (1987): *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- HEGERFELDT, A.C. (2005): *Lies That Tell the Truth; Magic Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction from Britain*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi B.V.
- JALALZAI, Z. (1999): "Tricksters, Captives, and Conjurers: The "Roots" of Liminality and Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart*." *American Indian Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (Winter): 25-44.
- KEADY, M. (1985): "Walking Backwards into the Fourth World: Survival of the Fittest in *Bearheart*." *American Indian Quarterly (Literary Achievements of Gerald Vizenor)* 9, no. 1 (Winter): 61-65.
- LYOTARD, J.F. Lyotard, (1984): *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir, 1979)*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis.
- MCCLURE, A. (1997): "Liberation and Identity: Bearing the Heart of The Heirship Chronicles." *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 9, no. 1 (Spring): 47-59.
- OWENS, L. (1990): "Afterword." In *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicle*, by Gerald Vizenor, 247-254. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.
- OWENS, L. (1992): *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P.
- PIKE, D. (2004). *Roadside New Mexico*. New Mexico. University of New Mexico Press.
- RIGAL-CELLARD, B. (1997): "Doubling in Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart*: The Pilgrimage Strategy or Bunyan Revisited." *Studies in American Indian Literature*, Spring: 93-114.
- SHACKLETON, M. (2001): "Native North American Writing and Postcolonialism." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, Fall: 69-89.
- VALDEZ MOSES, M. (2001): "Magical Realism at World's End." *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics*, 3, no. 1: 105-133.
- VELIE, A.R. (1982): *Four American Indian Literary Masters*. Norman: U of Oklahoma Press.
- VIZENOR, G. (1990): *Bearheart: the Heirship Chronicles*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, (first published in 1978).
- VIZENOR, G. (1994): *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. Middletown Conn.: Wesleyan University Press.
- VIZENOR, G. (1989): *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P.
- VIZENOR, G. (2009): *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*. New York and London: U of Nebraska P.
- VIZENOR, G. (1984). *The People Named Chippewa*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.
- WARNES, C. (2009): *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- VIZENOR, G. (1984). *The People Named Chippewa*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.
- WARNES, C. (2009): *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.