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MARITIME RESERVATIONS: HARBORING INDIGENOUS AMERICA IN GERALD VIZENOR'S *THE HEIRS OF COLUMBUS*²

Written and published in concomitance with the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in America, *The Heirs of Columbus* is a prime example of Vizenor's ability to reinvent history using humor and imagination. For those not very much familiar with him and his works, a few introductory notes may help. Of mixed Swedish-American and Ojibway/Anishinaabe ancestry, Vizenor is one of the major figures in contemporary Native American literature and intellectual life: novelist, poet, essayist, university professor, he is also an enrolled member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe on the White Earth Reservation. He is probably the writer that has most actively engaged the language and politics of postmodernism to put it at the service of indigenous people's cultural expression, starting with his first novel *Darkness in St Louis Bearheart* (1978). He is the inventor of neologisms and concepts that have become common currency in Native American Studies, such as for example the idea of *survivance* (a sort of proactive, anti-victimizing approach to survival) or the notion of *postindian* (which he adopted to contrast the simulation and falsification embodied by the signifier *Indian*, seen as a heritage of the colonial domination of indigenous America). Rejecting a static and fixed notion of Indian identity, he has elaborated a cross-blood (mixed-blood) aesthetics based on the liberating potential of trickster discourse—the trickster being the destabilizing and shapeshifting half-human, half-animal figure so crucial in Native American and particularly Ojibway mythology and folklore.

All of these aspects have a part in *The Heirs of Columbus*, and my exploration of the harbor theme cannot do without a consideration of the larger implications of this novel for the development of contemporary Native American literature. A first element to highlight is the work's intertextual dimension: the novel is full of references to real and imaginary texts belonging not only to the Euro-American tradition (think of the numerous quotes from Columbus' logbooks) but also to the Native American (Anishinaabe in particular) oral and written traditions—which can be seen for instance in the choice of character names that sometimes recall those of Native and non-Native fictional or real-life figures. As James Cox pointed out, such contextualization of the novel within the American Indian cultural tradition “helps liberate characters, and Vizenor's readers, from non-Native traditions that present a single colonial plot of Eurowestern superiority and inevitable violence and conquest” (125). Overall, *Heirs* is a satirical re-writing of the Columbian master narrative that counters the historical concept of discovery and the consequent subjugation of indigenous people, by transforming it into a return to indigenous sources of knowledge and existence, inspired by the healing power of stories and aimed at a continuation of Indian sovereignty on the American continent.³

Columbus is imagined by Vizenor as a man of mixed Mayan and Jewish ancestry; such genealogy weaves together the historical (though unfounded) belief that American Indians descended from the lost tribes of Israel with the imaginary notion that the Mayans had actually travelled to Europe long before the time when Europeans encountered their civilization in central America (right in the wake of Columbus' arrival in the

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² This piece constitutes a slightly longer version of a talk I gave at the latest AISNA Biennial Conference, which took place in Naples, 24-26 September 2015. The theme of the conference revolved around the idea of ‘harbor’ with its various declinations and connections (e.g. the issue of immigration) across the various fields of American Studies—including primarily literature, history, and visual culture.

³ Taiwanese scholar Iping Liang has provided an interesting analysis of the novel by discussing Vizenor's technique of “oppositional play,” which articulates a tribal-centered “discourse of encounter in the comic and communal sign of the trickster figure of Admiral Columbus” (124), as a form of tribal resistance against the tragic consequences of the real history of encounter.



continent). Columbus' voyage is thus reconfigured as a return to a homeland distant in time more than in space. The historical motivations behind the expedition are here replaced by Columbus' hearing of stories carried "in the blood" which inexorably attract him to a world that is actually older than Europe and contributed to establish its supposedly superior 'civilization.' According to Vizenor's narrative, upon his arrival in the Bahamas islands, Columbus meets and copulates with Samana, a shaman figure alternatively described as a "hand talker," a "silent tribal wanderer," a "golden healer," and a "cross-blood black bear" (4, 10, 12): from that "primal union" (20), the heirs of Columbus start spreading across the New World, and Samana continues to re-appear among the heirs to heal with the stories and with a blue radiance as she first did with the great explorer.

Of course, the heirs of the title are the present-day (1990s) descendants of Columbus and Samana; they constitute a sort of enlarged, bizarre family, where the confines between animal and human, natural and supernatural, are often unclear, in line with Vizenor's trickster universe. At the beginning of the novel, they reside at the headwaters of the Mississippi, along the shores of Lake of the Woods in the Northwest Angle enclave between the United States and Canada; here, they have anchored a pleasure barge named after Columbus' main caravel, *The Santa María Casino*, where they play bingo and other games of chance that guarantee them economic prosperity and constitute the economical basis of their sovereigntist claims. Right beside the Santa María there's also the Niña, a barge-restaurant, and the Pinta, a tax-free market. Through this ironical re-imagining of the famous Columbus' caravels, Vizenor re-appropriates "a master symbol of Euroamerican history" (Owens 101) from a Native American perspective, and transforms the epic of European discovery into an affirmation of Indian sovereignty in the contemporary scene. To do so, Vizenor has to engage with the authority of legal discourse that has characterized the relations between the US government and Indian tribes for centuries, and that has almost always relegated indigenous people into a subordinate position as subjects incapable of ruling themselves. At the beginning of the novel, for example, we are told that Stone Columbus, the oldest of the heirs and host of the bingo barge, had been arrested for violating state tax and gambling laws, but was subsequently released when a sympathetic federal judge ruled that "the Santa María and the other caravels are limited sovereign states at sea, the first maritime reservations in international waters" (7-8). Court hearings like this occupy center stage throughout the novel, especially when the heirs set out to repatriate the remains of Christopher Columbus and Pocahontas back to the newly-established Indian nation, and encounter the resistance of white museum directors and other obscure forces—a point I will briefly refer to later on.

It is clear that the water element is not inconsequential to Vizenor's elaboration of the harbor-as-sovereign-reservation metaphor. As the same judge who ruled in favor of Stone Columbus proclaims, "the notion of tribal sovereignty is not confiscable, or earth bound; it is neither fence nor feathers. The essence of sovereignty is imaginative, an original tribal trope, communal and spiritual, an idea that is more than metes and bounds in treaties" (7).⁴ This quote articulates in highly imaginative terms what is Vizenor's creed regarding the highly debated idea of Indian sovereignty: not a fixed, static reality that can be appropriated and usurped, and even less something that can be appraised or measured according to a western-centered anthropological or legalistic discourse, but something that, water-like, continually flows through the spirit and body of the community without being easily separated or isolated from it, and that is continually nurtured by the power of the imagination. In particular, imagination is what allows Native people (and human beings in general) to think differently of history and its traumatic events, and to produce alternative scenarios that reject the imposed narratives of European conquest and white superiority, in order to better sustain native communities in their dealing with past, present, and future challenges. This is exactly the kind of operation Vizenor pursues through *The Heirs of Columbus*, i.e. a liberating narrative that runs counter to the official histories of Euroamerican discovery and possession of indigenous land (and sea), and that at the same time, by means of scathing humor and satire, may heal indigenous people from the malady generated by a century-long colonial oppression. As Kathryn Hume has argued, "another function of the imagination is to guard us against a fatal attraction of terminal creeds" (131), an expression that Vizenor coined to describe,

⁴ In another passage of the novel, a character proclaims that "the notion of sovereignty is not tied to the earth, sovereignty is neither fence nor feathers," and that "the very essence of sovereignty is a communal laser" (62).



using James Cox's terms, "the systems of belief that oppress the human imagination and justify the many manifestations of colonial violence" (137).

I would argue that it is precisely the peculiar topography of the harbor what allows Vizenor to resist the kind of colonial discourse that the heirs are so dedicated to overturning. Envisioning a sovereign Indian nation on a land reservation would not have sounded equally subversive, and perhaps it would have risked reiterating the masterful image of confinement with "fence and feathers" that is historically sanctioned by the federal establishment of the reservation system. Imagining a sort of unhistorical, or anti-historical maritime reservation, instead, Vizenor circumvents the disempowering limitations of official history while playing at the same time with the aquatic imagery of the Columbian discovery. The tribal nation established by the heirs, however, is not what one would be tempted to describe as a utopian formation: on the contrary, the maritime reservations/nations Vizenor describes occupy specific geographical locations, whose geopolitical nature bespeaks the senselessness of Euro-American partitioning of the continent but also the Indians' ability to carve out a space of resistance and to promptly claim their territorial rights on the land of the ancestors. I just used the plural 'reservations' since I have not specified yet that in the novel the heirs move from one maritime reservation to another, with the latter being a more solid continuation of the former: when the Santa Maria Casino sinks due to a violent storm on Lake of the Woods, the heirs travel westward to establish another, even more impressive sovereign harbor at Point Roberts in Washington State, which they rename Point Assinika, the "place of stones."⁵ Similarly to the Northwest Angle exclave, Point Roberts too has a peculiar characteristic: it rests on a strip of land that is physically separated from the United States, since it borders Canada and the waters of Boundary Bay, but belongs to the US given that its latitude is below the 49th parallel (the Northwest Angle, instead, is the only place outside Alaska lying north of the parallel).

By choosing such peculiarly-situated areas as the headquarters of the heirs' tribal nations, Vizenor playfully evokes the tragic history of Euro-American encroachment on Native land and its splitting among colonialist national powers (the US and Canada) by means of treaties that flagrantly ignore the presence of indigenous people on the continent. But the power of his invention goes farther than that: in a sense, what is here being challenged is the Euro-American arrogant certainty that Native tribes have been definitely confined to enclosed spaces and that they can no longer constitute a menace for the territorial wholeness of either the United States or Canada. Inhabiting such interstitial, border-line spaces that are generally overlooked by the big Anglo-American nation states, the heirs pose themselves as a subversive and destabilizing presence, though their main commitment now is not to violent conquest but to the act of healing with storytelling, games of chance, genetic research. In addition, the fact that in both cases (at the Mississippi headwaters in Minnesota and at Point Roberts in Washington) the heirs' sovereign nations are essentially harbor/marine terminals, occupying inter-national waters between land and sea (or lake), is instrumental to Vizenor's creative elaboration of the Columbian myth: after all, upon his arrival in the Caribbean sea, the great admiral was indeed crossing what we may term 'inter-national' waters, if we think retrospectively (but coherently with the present-day struggle of indigenous people) of pre-Columbian America as peopled by sovereign native nations. In addition, the water element suggests the fluidity of indigenous notions of place, which is not a static figuration on a map but a presence living in tribal memories and tribal stories. As Vizenor stated in an interview included in his book *Postindian Conversations*, referring specifically to his imagining of Point Assinika, "the creation of a native place is in the memory of the story;" places are remembered and continued through stories that engender their creation as if "out of water," since for Vizenor "we are water, and there is no presence without water and trickster stories of that creation" (135).

Besides turning the Genoese explorer into a cross-blood tribal trickster and the trope of discovery into a much-awaited homecoming, the novel also provides, more specifically, a revision of the mythology of US freedom and exceptionalism from a tribal perspective. Namely, what the heirs accomplish throughout the narrative can be seen as a re-staging of the Slotkinian idea of 'regeneration through violence' in the form of a 're-generation through healing,' whereby the very word 'regeneration' assumes an additional value by merging the act of generating with the idea of descent from a common ancestor (i.e., Columbus). And once again, the harbor imagery is very effective in illustrating this point. The sinking of the Santa Maria Casino in a thunderstorm at Lake of the Woods, for example, clearly recalls the running ashore of the real Santa Maria

⁵ Stones and stone-related images recur throughout the novel to symbolize ideas of birth and regeneration according to a specific tribal (Ojibway) account of creation stories. See Liang 134-135.



caravel in late December 1492—an event which gave origin to the first European settlement in the Americas, La Navidad. But in the context of Vizenor's satirical revision of the Columbian myth, the casino's shipwreck may also stand as a reprimand against the danger of reiterating the European greed for the New World riches. As James Cox argued, the activities taking place in the casino barge (which he defines as "gambling on maritime explorations in search for treasures," 131) figuratively associate Stone Columbus' tourists and casino attenders with Christopher Columbus's sailors and the Spanish monarchs funding his expedition. However, when later in the novels the heirs decide to establish another maritime reservation at Point Roberts, equipped with yet another casino, they ground it more decidedly on healing and communal liberation rather than, as the shipwrecked Santa Maria sailors did, on the personal accumulation of riches and the search for gold.

In addition, once settled at Point Roberts, the heirs place a giant copper statue on the shore near the marina and name it "the Trickster of Liberty." Higher than the Statue of Liberty and facing west instead of east, the statue also bears an inscription that promises "to heal the tired tribes and huddled masses yearning to breathe free" (122): as is well-known to American readers, these words are an almost exact replica of those found on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor, taken from Emma Lazarus's sonnet. But rather than being presented as a protective, maternal figure for the (generally white) immigrants seeking refuge in the New World, the heirs' statue stands out as a tribute to the healing power of American Indian tribal humor, visually reinforced by the attributes of the trickster figure, as the numerous references to its being "crotch high" testify. Moreover, differently from the kind of imagery usually evoked by the Statue of Liberty, the trickster monument announces the entrance into a nation that rejects the regulatory and disciplinary practices of the western nation states: Point Assinika is indeed described as a "free state with no prisons, no passports, no public schools, no missionaries, no television, and no public taxation" (124), whose primary commitment is healing through "genetic therapies, natural medicine, bingo cards, and entertainment." The commitment to healing and trickster stories runs counter to the arrogance and violence of what Vizenor terms a "monotheistic chemical civilization" (Vizenor and Lee 129) that has been poisoning and ravaging the American continent since the time of Columbus's first landing.⁶ As several scholars have noted, moreover, the establishment of Point Assinika as a sovereign nation is interwoven with the Ojibway creation myths, lying outside the exclusively legal-political framework through which a Euro-centered perspective may read that accomplishment. Besides liberating Native people from the entrapping narratives of European emigration and discovery (Cox 139), then, the novel successfully commits itself to write history anew in a way that is respectful to native presence and informed by native beliefs in the American continent. A few words need to be said about another crucial subplot in the novel, i.e. that revolving around the repatriation of the Christopher Columbus and Pocahontas remains. Their ashes need to be protected from the greedy hands of what Vizenor calls "bone barons," i.e. white anthropologists, scientists, or collectors that steal tribal remains for purely scientific purposes or, even worse, for profit and exhibition: in their hands, the stories of the dead are turned into "academic chattel" inside museums or other sites that symbolize white exploitation of indigenous history. The ashes are also important to the heirs in that they carry the "genetic signature of survivance" (33), the phrase Vizenor employs to indicate the regenerative power of tribal memories and knowledge for the survival of future generations. In the novel, it is Stone's wife Felipa Flowers that is especially committed to the repatriation of the bones: Vizenor describes her as "a tribal liberator who poached tribal remains from museums to atone for the moral corruption of missionaries, anthropologists, archaeo-necromancers" (50). First, she manages to steal the Columbus remains along with other sacred medicine pouches from a New York museum thanks to the aid of a teleporting trickster shaman, and subsequently wins the lawsuit filed against her by the cunning museum manager. Then, to recover the

⁶ Examining the crucial fact of Vizenor's battle against harmful colonial representations through other representations (though in the interest of indigenous people), Stuart Christie points out the novel's regrettable overlooking of extant tribal survival and resilience: "Vizenor's rewriting of Assinikan cultural and geographic space, as it so happens, is also an overwriting of the oral, trickster tradition of the coastal Salish peoples who have historically inhabited not 'Assinika' (...) but Chelh-ten-em, translated from coastal Salish as 'the place where one hangs salmon to dry'" (113). For Christie, such failure to account for the existing tribal presence in the area "across which Vizenor maps his liberated Assinikan nation, casts a long shadow across his powerful articulation of trickster potential."



Pocahontas' ashes she has to travel overseas in England, where a book collector helps her locate them in the cemetery of an old parish church near London; however, before she can grab the ash casket, she is killed by a mysterious murderer who will turn out to be the director of the New York museum. By the end of the novel, after the arrest of the villain, the remains of Pocahontas will eventually be delivered by the London antiquarian at the new nation at Point Assinika, where they join those of Columbus in order to be "sealed in vaults at the House of Life near the base of the Trickster of Liberty" (174).⁷

With the sealing of Columbus and Pocahontas' ashes in a sort of "trickster shrine," the heirs have completed their mission of turning these two cultural icons from emblems of the epic of discovery and the submission of indigenous people by Euro-American powers into living tribal ancestors to be treasured by the entire community. By playing humorously with both history and myth, Vizenor's novel has revised the master narrative of domination and exploitation that shaped for centuries the dominant understanding of American history, and that still characterized prominently the 1992 Columbian Quincentenary celebrations. In James Cox's words, "the political currency of the novel derives from the liberatory humor, not from the possibility that the story itself will become a new master narrative of dominance" (129). While *The Heirs of Columbus* is a comical attack against the ways those official accounts of history have perpetuated the oppression of indigenous people, it is also a serious invitation to use the liberating power of imagination and trickster humor to dismantle the authority of those narratives and envision a brighter future for indigenous people and their communities.

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⁷ Liang has interestingly discussed the trans-Atlantic exchanges that characterize the novel, and that are visible not just in the obvious 'detective-story' subplot, but also in the re-figuring of the Great Admiral as a Sephardic Jew (136-137). From this perspective, *The Heirs of Columbus* is a work that perfectly fits Jace Weaver's paradigm of a 'Red Atlantic' (literary) imaginary spanning more than five centuries, from the accounts of Columbus and his contemporaries to the postmodern revisions of American Indian history and experience by writers like Vizenor (see Weaver, especially chapters 1 and 5).