

Crossing the Bering Strait:
The Transpacific Turn in Gerald Vizenor's *The Trickster of Liberty*¹

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Gerald Vizenor has been recognized, in the midst of more than 30 books—including novels, poetry, essays, journalism, autobiography, screen play, and literary criticism—as one of the most prolific and profound Native American writers and critics of our time. His works, in the words of Kimberly Blaeser, are devoted to “upsetting the status quo, to deconstructing the term ‘Indian,’ to re-defining the mixedblood, and to liberating the contemporary Native people he identifies as the *postindian*” (257). A. Robert Lee claims that Vizenor is a “storyteller, [a] maker of ‘wordarrows,’ . . . [and] a major player in the century’s efflorescence of Native literary word” (17).² At the heart of Vizenor’s fictional worlds are his concerns with the mixedblood and the trickster, who, as Louis Owens asserts, “[refuse] to perish in the dark cave of the American psyche” (225). Instead, they “soar to freedom in avian dreams” (Owens 225).

The well-known Anishinaabe American writer is a registered member of the White Earth Reservation, which is located in the northwestern part of the state of Minnesota, straddling the transnational border between Canada and the United States. In *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative History*, Vizenor writes

The sacred *miigis* shell of the Anishinaabeg spiritual world, a shell resembling the cowrie, arose from the eastern sea and moved with the seasons, . . . Five hundred years ago, in mythic ceremonies, the *miigis* shell appeared in the sun for the last time at Mooningwanekaning, or Madeline Island, in Anishinaabe Gichigami, Lake Superior, the great sea of the Anishinaabeg. . . . (21)

And he continues in the section entitled “woodland reservations”:

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² I would like to hereby express my deep and enormous gratitude to Prof. A. Robert Lee for his advice, guidance, and many times, playing the role of the “hotline healer” in support of my work on Gerald Vizenor.

The Anishinaabeg have been divided by colonial, national, territorial, and state claims. Certain rights have been restored to tribal communities according to the interests of local governments, but in spite of these divisions, there exists a sense of common tribal consciousness. Anishinaabeg people live on provincial reserves in Ontario and Manitoba and on reservations in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and North Dakota. (32)

If the former passage indicates a bonding union between the land and the people, it is clear to see from the latter that the Anishinaabeg are scattered across the border as a result of the five hundred years of colonization. In the context of the Anishinaabe diaspora, I argue that the transnational border is the setting for many of Vizenor's fictional works. In two of his novels, Vizenor incorporates the transnational border into his fiction and situate his characters in the transgression of border crossings. In *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), the story of Louis Riel is included. Riel was the legendary Métis outlaw leader, who was forced to cross the border to the United States in the aftermath of the Red River Revolt in 1869. In his exile, Riel was detained in the Dakota Territory, moved west to the Montana Territory, got married with a Métis woman, and fathered three children who were born on the U.S. side of the border. He was then arrested, convicted, and executed as a result of the military confrontation between the Métis soldiers and the Canadian government in 1885.³ Riel, as a figure of First Nation tribal hero, was “seditious to the end for the rights and claims of tribal members” (qtd. in Blair 163).

If Louis Riel crosses the border to come the United States in search of political shelter, in *The Trickster of Liberty: Native Heirs to a Wild Baronage* (1988), the other novel about the transnational border, Vizenor pushes the border further up and has the heir of the baronage, Slyboots Browne, and three airborne warriors “[fly] across the Bering Strait to the People's Republic of China” (132). Slyboots goes to China to look for Griever de Hocus, the Native trickster Monkey King who is teaching English in China at the time.⁴ Slyboots goes China along with the elder sister, China Browne. In addition, their younger brother, Ginseng Browne, has been active in the ginseng trade with the Chinese, who have come to

³ The event was also known as the North-West Rebellion. In 1992, Canadian Parliament passed a resolution and recognized Riel as the founder of the province of Manitoba.

⁴ In the early novel about China, *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* (1987), the protagonist Griever de Hocus goes to China to teach English and to liberate the chickens, the frogs, and the people subject to the nation. For details, please see my paper, “Native American Fantastic: Re-reading Gerald Vizenor's *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*.”

the tribe, “eager to control the purchase of the special wild amber ginseng from the baronage” (*Trickster* 134).

By focusing on the transnational border between Canada and the United States, this paper investigates the transgression of border crossings in Vizenor’s third novel, *The Trickster of Liberty: Native Heirs to a Wild Baronage* (1988). I argue, along with Elvira Pulitano and Brigitte Georgi-Findlay that the transnational turn in Native American literatures is long past due. If Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, and James Welch, among others, turn their attention to the thematic of transatlantic migrations, I argue that Gerald Vizenor deserves our critical attention as a steadfast transnational Native American writer of our time.⁵ Since the late seventies, Vizenor has been constantly writing about Native Americans traveling, mobilizing, or “on motion.” Natives do go abroad—to countries like China, Japan, Mexico, Canada, England, Spain, and Cuba, among other places. By going global (and transnational), Vizenor nevertheless brings home his commitment to tribal nativism.⁶ Most importantly, it is in the transnational border between Canada and the United States, the border-transgressing *Anishinaabeg*, where Vizenor is preeminently anchored. In *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, he takes Griever de Hocus to China and dramatizes the disturbance of a Native trickster Monkey King in China. In *The Trickster of Liberty*, he turns the table around by having the Chinese cross the border and “come home” to North America. In his latest novel, *Father Meme*, Vizenor revisits the transnational border and trenchantly dramatizes on the scene of child sex abuse by Catholic priests. Along with Louis Riel, Pauline Johnson, Mourning Dove, D’arcy McNickle, James Welch, and Louise Erdrich, Vizenor should be recognized as a prominent writer of the transnational border between Canada and the United States. Like them, Vizenor situates his fiction in the transnational border and makes the northern border the “felicitous place”⁷ of his fictional worlds.⁸

My reading, however, is different from both Pulitano and Georgi-Findley in one critical aspect. Instead of the transatlantic turn they have analyzed in their works, I contend an alternative transnational perspective by turning to the transpacific. I argue that by paying attention to the transpacific turn to China, specifically in *The Trickster of Liberty: Native Heirs to a Wild Baronage* (1988), we not only expand our critical reading of the Vizenorian transnationalism, but also situate the transnational border between Canada and the United States as the locale

⁵ It is important to add that my study is limited to Vizenor’s prose work only.

⁶ I am not sure if Vizenor uses the term “nativism,” which is my own choice of words.

⁷ This is a notion taken from Gaston Bachelard. For details, please see Helen May Dennis, *Native American Literature: Towards a Spatialized Reading* (33-37).

⁸ This includes, among others, *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* (1987), *The Trickster of Liberty* (1988), *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), and *Father Meme* (2008).

where the national boundaries are “loosened,”⁹ and where the pre-national tribal woodland would once again come into view as the “remembered” homeland of the Anishinaabeg.

The Transnational/Transpacific Turn to China

In *Transatlantic Voices: Interpretations of Native North American Literatures*, Elvira Pulitano states in the “Introduction” that the contributors of the volume “take the Atlantic as a site of cross-cultural exchange and circulation of ideas, a bridge linking in the Old and New Worlds, in the attempt to overcome historical and ideological differences” (xiii). Drawing on Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Pulitano argues that European scholars “interested in transnational and intercultural perspective have found in the Atlantic a fruitful, creative space around which to articulate ideas on ethnicity, race, gender, class, sovereignty, nationalism, migration, and language in an increasingly globalized world” (xiii). In addition, the work of Annette Kolodny on “Viking contact with Native North American tribes in Canada and Maine” (Pulitano xiv) also serves as a good model for transnational and particularly transatlantic interconnectedness between the Old and New Worlds. She then draws on the recent development in the fields of postcolonialism and globalization and argues that Native North American literary studies could benefit from bilateral dialogues with these critical discourses. Finally by paying tribute to her mentor, Louis Owens, who first helped nurture the seed for a volume like *Transatlantic Voices*, Pulitano wishes it to “bring together, perhaps for the first time since [Christian] Feest’s edited collection (in 1984), a wide number of European scholars with common interests concerning the study of Native North American literatures” (xviii).

Likewise, Brigitte Georgi-Findley in her article “Transatlantic Crossings: New Developments in the Contemporary North American Novel” argues that there has been a “cosmopolitan” trend in recent novels by Native American authors. She contends that “many recent novels explore transcultural connections and point to the instability of ethnic and national identities by tracing affinities (including transatlantic ones) between people beyond culture, ethnicity, and nationality” (89). By tracing the characteristics of Native American authors—from the “blood memory” of N. Scott Momaday, the hybrid “mixedblood frontier” of Louis Owens, the modernist influences from Hemingway, Eliot, and Faulkner, and the postindian “trickster discourse” of Gerald Vizenor, Georgi-Findley considers the “Native

⁹ This is taken from the title of the volume edited by A. Robert Lee, *Loosening the Seams: Interpretations of Gerald Vizenor* (2000).

encounter with Europe” to be a new theme of recent Native American novels. She cites Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) and James Welch’s *Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000) to be two primary examples. She argues that both Silko and Welch “explore the boundaries of culture by pointing to transcultural connections and the instability of ethnic and national identities” (105). Moreover, she concludes if “Silko uses Europe as a positive, contrastive foil in order to explore the failures of white America, Welch explores the way Europeans use Indians to express their criticism of or ambivalence toward America, masking the realities of racial exclusion in their own societies” (105).

While I find Pulitano and Georgi-Findlay to be critical and inspiring, they fail to mention the possible dialogue with or positive inclusion of Asia. It is important to reiterate that as early as 1987 Gerald Vizenor had published *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, a Native American transnational/transpacific text that focuses on Native trickster’s travels in China. A year later, the novel earned the American Book Award in 1988. The fact that this “American” novel is situated in an Asian country deserves our close scrutiny. And I argue that China plays an important role in Vizenor’s transnational/transpacific turns to non-US “sites and transits.”¹⁰ Moreover, if we take Vizenor’s poetry into consideration, his experience in Japan in the fifties and the subsequent publications of haiku poetry would then be taken as Vizenor’s transnational/transpacific turns, even earlier than the *Monkey King* novel being published in 1987. That is to say, Vizenor has made his transnational/transpacific turns as early as the sixties when, for example, his first collection of haiku poem, *Two Wings the Butterfly: Haiku Poems in English*, was published in 1962. Different from what Pulitano and Georgi-Findley have argued, I maintain that Vizenor has made critical *transpacific* turns to Japan and China before his fellow Native writers make their transatlantic turns to England, Italy, France, or Germany.

In light of the transnational/transpacific turns, *The Trickster of Liberty* could be read as a sequel to *Griever*. Although it was published after *Griever*, it tells stories that actually take place before *Griever* de Hocus goes to China. It’s clear that the two could be read as a set. Moreover, the two are inter-connected in many ways. If *Griever* focuses on *Griever*’s adventures in the foreign country in China, *The Trickster of Liberty* turns to his tribal family in “Patronia,” a fictional Anishinaabe township in the transnational border. If *Griever* narrates *Griever*’s encounter with various Chinese characters, to whom *Griever* is the “foreign devil,” *The Trickster of Liberty* tells the stories of his Anishinaabe family, into which he is

¹⁰ This notion is taken from Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s co-edited volume on Asian American transnationalism (2006).

adopted. If *Griever* concerns the issue of literary intertextuality with the Chinese classic, *The Journey to the West*, *The Trickster of Liberty* is related to the ginseng trade with the Chinese.¹¹ Taken together, both *Griever* and *The Trickster of Liberty* illustrate Vizenor's interest in China, the foreign country, *as well as* his concern with the origin of tribal peoples in North America, the homeland.

A summary of the plot is in order before we pursue with further analysis. *The Trickster of Liberty* is divided into 17 episodes, including the Prologue, the Epilogue, the introduction to Patronia, the fictionalized ancestral homeland, and the fourteen stories, two for each of the seven trickster heirs at Patronia. In this novel, Vizenor creates a fictional tribal township by the name of Patronia, which is owned by the fictional trickster patriarch Luster Browne (from Lusterbow), hence the Baron of Patronia. In this self-fashioned oral tradition, Vizenor accounts the family saga of three generations' stories in the ancestral homeland: the grandparents, Luster Browne and Novena Mae Ironmoccasin; the parents, Shadow Box Browne and Wink Martin (and her brother Mouse Proof Martin and his friend Griever de Hocus, who is adopted into the family); and then the nine children/heirs born to Shadow Box and Wink: China Browne, Tune Browne, Tulip(wood) Browne, Garlic Browne, Ginseng Browne, Eternal Flame Browne, Father Mother Browne, Mime Browne, and Slyboots Browne. Taken together, it is a dear and comic family narrative done in the style of oral tradition which is episodic and fragmented.¹²

On the other hand, the narrative is ideologically replete with the Vizenorian criticism of the American Indian politics of representation. Both the Prologue and the Epilogue bear the Vizenorian postmodern trademark of self-reflexivity: While the Prologue, entitled "Tricksters and Transvaluations," summarizes the antagonism between the trans-gender trickster Sergeant Alex(ina) Hobraiser and cultural anthropologist Eastman Shicer, the Epilogue, entitled "Loss Leaders from the Universities," is meta-fictional in that Vizenor gives detailed footnotes to sources he consulted with while working on this fiction. Finally, the Introduction, "The Baron of Patronia," gives a most affectionate portrait of the fictional trickster patriarch, Luster Browne, who functions as the ancestor of the Baronage. It is most important to note that Luster Browne is given the title to the land on which the Baronage, or the fictional township of Patronia, is founded:

¹¹ The ginseng trade is of course adapted from the fur trade with the French, which Vizenor's ancestors were involved with and through which the family got their French-sounding family name. For details, please see *Interior Landscapes* (xx-xx).

¹² There are good reasons to infer that the Browne family is adapted from the Vizenor family. Please see the chapter "Family of the Crane" in *Interior Landscapes*, in which Vizenor gives a detailed account of family lineage and their involvement in the fur trade with the French (3-20).

“Whereas, there has been deposited in the General Land Office of the United States an Order of the Secretary of the Interior directing that a fee simple patent issue to Luster Browne, a White Earth Mississippi Chippewa Indian, for a quarter west of the Fifth Principal meridian containing one-hundred sixty acres in a Township named Patronia:

“Now know ye, that the United states of America, in consideration of the promises, has given and granted, and by these presents does give and grant, unto the said Luster Browne, and to his heirs,, the lands above described, and the title, Baron of Patronia; to have and to hold the same, together with all the rights, privileges, immunities, and appurtenances, of whatsoever nature thereunto belonging, unto the said Baron Luster Browne, and to his heirs and assigns forever.” (4-5)¹³

Despite Luster Browne’s baronage in the ancestral homeland, he is however fascinated with other parts of the world, especially China. His first grandchild, China Browne, is named after China. China gains her name from her grandfather, who “[shouts] in a panic hole to celebrate the birth of his first grandchild” (*Trickster* 14). Luster claims that he hears “the echo of [China’s] name when he [shouted] into a panic hole, down to the other side of the earth, to the other world” (*Trickster* 15). “The other world” is, without doubt, China, and hence the first Patronia grandchild is named after China, the “other side of the earth.”

China, the “other side of the earth,” turns out to be intriguing and significant. With the exception of Japan, China remains the only foreign country that Vizenor has lived for an extensive period of time. He accepted an offer to teach English for a year between 1983 and 1984 at Tianjin University in Tianjin, China. “China, a Treasure in the Heart” remains to be a mystery and a taboo to westerners. The protagonist Griever de Hocus is a Native trickster who accepts an offer to teach English in People’s Republic of China. The novel accounts his journeys in China and his encounters with several Chinese characters fashioned after the Chinese opera. The novel ends with Griever and his rooster attendant Matteo Ricci driving a microlight airplane en route to Macau, disappearing into the horizon.

¹³ In *Interior Landscapes*, we learn that the land allotment was actually granted to Vizenor’s paternal grandmother, Alice Mary Beaulieu, in 1908, when she was twenty two years of old (16). The legal language is actually taken from that in the 1908 land title, which was signed by President Theodore Roosevelt. The quoted passage is of seminal importance to my reading of Vizenorian *corpus*, which I will elaborate in later revisions of this manuscript.

Vizenor's trip to China in 1983 proves to be his encounter with a communist regime before it opened the doors to outsiders. Various critics have paid attention to the relationship between *Griever* and Vizenor's experience in China. A. Robert Lee states that *Griever* concerns "a China still, if uncertainly, under Maoist political rules" (*Loosening* 11). Elaine Jahner comments that Vizenor is highly aware of the political instability of China. She states, "Vizenor wrote *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* before the massacre in Tiananmen Square and he imaginatively anticipated that event" (46). Jahner argues that the fact that the novel precedes the massacre manifests Vizenor's high sensitivity to socio-political regimes of oppression. Griever's observation "This is an enormous reservation" (qtd. in Jahner 47) reveals right away Vizenor's sympathy with the Chinese people. *Griever* should therefore be read in the context of the global anxiety with a China that is economically and geopolitically on the rise. (On the other hand, Vizenor's inclusion of the rooster named Matteo Ricci and his intertextual adaptation of *The Journey to the West* are all illustrations of the generic nature of the travelogue in *Griever*.)¹⁴

The Chinese in the Wild Baronage

While Vizenor is critical of the Communist regime in China, he nevertheless pokes fun at the anthropological assumption of the tribal origins in Asia/China. His lively imagination makes border crossings naturally a two-way trafficking. If tribal tricksters go China, the Chinese come to North America by crossing the Bering Strait. China's brother, Ginseng Browne, who is involved in the ginseng trade with the Chinese, says to a white postman,

The Chinese, you see, are one of the long lost tribes, our brothers. You must have heard about the Bering Strait? Well, we migrated from here to there, and they are coming back. So you see, this is their real homeland. (136)

The reference to *Heirs of Columbus* is important in our reading of *The Trickster of Liberty*. While Christopher Columbus turns out to be a mixedblood trickster who bears the mixed "Sephardic-Jew-Mayan" lineage (Blair 155), Vizenor is not hesitant to suggest that the Chinese are tribal as well. In his trickstering imagination, the Chinese turn out to be the lost tribe of the Native peoples of the Americas. Like Don Colon, the Chinese become Native and have crossed the

¹⁴ This is a point which I will elaborate in the revision.

border to “come home” in the woodland, where they establish a “Middle Kingdom at Patronia,” and where they will erect, like the gift from the French government, the Statue of Liberty, an enormous statue of “The Trickster of Liberty.”¹⁵

Border crossings however could be dangerous and risky. In the story, “The Middle Kingdom at Patronia,” Ginseng Browne is involved in the ginseng trade with China. He invites the China National Medicine and Health Products Import and Export Corporation to the baronage, and is introduced to the young translator, She Yan, a translator for the China National Medicine and Health Products Import and Export Corporation from the People’s Republic of China.

She Yan carried a map of the reservation so that she would never cross the border by accident and risk arrest by immigration officers; she memorized the names of border towns and measured the miles between communities. She was more aware of her environment than she had ever been back home. (144)

Conclusion

Vizenor is not only postmodern, but *postindian*. In his “postindian conversations”¹⁶ with Gerald Vizenor, British critic and the foremost Vizenorian scholar A. Robert Lee poses this question: “Why [do you] make Christopher Columbus a Mayan?” (108).¹⁷ Vizenor answers,

The Bering Strait migration myth or story has always fascinated me by its arrogance that natives came here from somewhere else and did so across the Bering Strait. That tidy bit of cultural arrogance denies the origin story of natives, the traditional myths that native emerged from the earth here. . . . There’s no evidence that the Bering Strait migration took place in one direction or another. (128)

¹⁵ Again, this is another point which I will elaborate in the revision.

¹⁶ This is taken from the title of the conversations between A. Robert Lee and Gerald Vizenor in their co-authored book, *Postindian Conversations*, in which by way of questions and answers, Lee and Vizenor present the most detailed information about the conceptions, backgrounds, and in some cases, intended meanings of selected works by Vizenor. It has proved to be the most comprehensive study guide and critical introduction to Gerald Vizenor, the writer and his works.

¹⁷ The question refers to *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), which reverses the notion that Columbus “discovered” North America. On the contrary, Vizenor imagines that Columbus is native Mayan and returns home to North America.

Therefore, in *The Heirs of Columbus*, Christopher Columbus, instead of “discovering” the Americas, “returns” to North America, his Native homeland. Not only Columbus is native, his “return” to North America is Vizenor’s critique of the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ “discovery” of North America.¹⁸

Likewise, in *The Trickster of Liberty*, Vizenor writes back to the anthropological arrogance in their conceptualization of tribal migrations across the Bering Strait. On the contrary, he imagines that it is the Chinese who cross the border to come home to the wild baronage, their “real homeland” (*Trickster* 136). While both Columbus and the Chinese are “coming home” to the baronage, it’s the belief in tribal **indigeneity**, nativism, and “baronage” in the woodland where the famed Anishinaabe poet and novelist finally comes home. That is to say, it is the Native and trickstering imagination of a wild tribal baronage on the woodland, where Gerald Vizenor is “homed,” physically and spiritually.¹⁹

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¹⁸ In response to the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ landing in North America, two other novels are important: Louise Erdrich’s *The Crown of Columbus* (1991) and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *The Almanac of the Dead* (1991). In addition, Louis Owens’ *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (1992) should be read in the context of the “discovery.” Arnold Krupat makes this point in *All That Remains* (ix-x).

¹⁹ Gerald Vizenor and his wife Laura Hall have moved back to Minneapolis in summer 2008. They had left Minnesota in June 1983 (*Loosening* 11) to take on jobs in Tianjin, Berkeley, Santa Cruz, Oklahoma City, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque, among other places. Perhaps, after an exilic journey of 25 years, the Anishinaabe writer has finally come home to the woodland.

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The Bering Strait Crossing is the epic story of the Intercontinental Divide. The ancient waterway - when the fog clears over the Diomedes Islands - is among the world's most stunning vistas. This is where the 53-mile wide strait, named for Danish explorer Vitus Bering (1681-1741), separates four continents. The Bering Strait Crossing is the epic story of the Intercontinental Divide. Russia has widely expanded its control over its Arctic territories, and the unique infrastructure it has built in the Polar region is unmatched by any other country, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu has said. A Bering Strait crossing is a hypothetical bridge or tunnel spanning the relatively narrow and shallow Bering Strait between the Chukotka Peninsula in Russia and the Seward Peninsula in the U.S. state of Alaska. The crossing would provide a connection linking North America and Eurasia. With the two Diomedes Islands between the peninsulas, the Bering Strait could be spanned by a bridge or tunnel. There might be one bridge, almost 40 kilometers (25 mi) long, connecting Alaska and the Diomedes Islands, and Crossing the Bering Strait. Transpacific Turns and Native Literatures. Authored by: Iping Liang. The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature. Print publication date: October 2015 Online publication date: October 2015. In The Trickster of Liberty: Native Heirs to a Wild Baronage (1988), Anishinaabe American writer and critic Gerald Vizenor turns his eye to the watery crossroads between North America and Asia. In this episodic narrative, Vizenor creates a fictional tribal township by the name of Patronia, which is owned by the trickster patriarch Luster Browne. In his self-fashioned oral tradition, Vizenor recounts the family saga of three generations of the Brownes in the wild baronage.