

## Opposition Play: Trans-Atlantic Trickstering in Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*\*

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### Abstract

This paper argues that by enacting "opposition play," a form of play meant for strategies of opposition, Chippewa/Ojibway novelist Gerald Vizenor comments on the legacy of Christopher Columbus in contemporary trans-Atlantic intercourses.<sup>1</sup> By turning the Admiral into a crossblood Jewish Mayan trickster, Vizenor transforms the tragedy of clash into a comedy of trickstering. His bold imagination not only strikes a chord with postmodern (and postcolonial) revisionism, but also answers the call of literature to "change the world."

The paper consists of two parts. The first attempts to construct a theoretical framework of play, drawing from the works of Johan Huizinga (1951), Victor Turner (1982), Mihai Spinosu (1989), Gerald Vizenor (1989), and Cynthia Sau-ling Wong (1993) to illustrate a discourse of play that dates back to the times of archaic Greece. I argue that the prerational form of play could be related to a tribal notion of trickstering, taking cues from Hermes, the messenger of Zeus, who is himself a trickster. By relating the Western discourse of prerational play to the tribal tradition of trickstering, I maintain that the notion of "trickster play" is as "playful" as Greek mythological figures, and that the tribal élan of play could be regarded as "Native American *homo ludens*," Vizenor himself being a major player.

The second part of the paper gives a thematic reading of the novel to illustrate the discourse of trickster play. It will treat, in particular, three strands of the plot: the legacy of Columbus and Pocahontas; the positive use of modern technology, including radio, laser shows, and genetic research; and the establishment of a utopian Stone Nation at Point Assinika. The paper will conclude with a reading of the epilogue and argue that the novel could be read as Vizenor's own trickstering of a Tribal New World.

### Keywords

Gerald Vizenor, *The Heirs of Columbus*, trans-Atlantic, play, trickster, opposition, Native American Literature, Christopher Columbus, quincentenary, *homo ludens*

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<sup>1</sup> The word is chosen to denote the "communication or dealings between or among people, countries, etc.; interchange of products, services, ideas, feelings, etc." (*Webster's New World Dictionary of American English*, Third College Edition, Prentice Hall: New York, 1994, 703). Its sexual connotation is also important as the mating between Columbus and Samana, a Mayan native woman, originates the "heirship" in the novel. For alternative trans-Atlantic interpretations, please see, among others, Paul Giroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, New York: Verso, 1993.

That the “vanishing” of native peoples of North America is a form of historical violence is axiomatic. The clash between Europe and the Americas,<sup>2</sup> as symbolized by the figures of the Spanish conquistador and the American *indian*,<sup>3</sup> nevertheless proffers the backdrop of trans-Atlantic imaginations in contemporary Native American literature. In contrast to the themes of feminization and noble savagery in the imaginations of Pocahontas (Smith 1630), Chingachgook (Cooper, *The Leatherstockings* series, 1823-1841), and Hiawatha (Longfellow 1855), the heroic image of Columbus towers in William Carlos Williams’s re-telling of the “Discovery of the Indies” (1925: 7-26). If the historical moment of “discovery” is represented in Williams’s “American grain,” it is re-appropriated from a different angle by a native writer:

The Admiral of the Ocean Sea, [...] landed at dawn with no missionaries or naturalists and heard the thunder of shamans in the coral and the stone. “No sooner had we concluded the formalities of taking possession of the island than people began to come to the beach,” he wrote in his journal on October 12, 1492, at Samana Cay. (1991: 3)

Not only is the (quoted) passage a re-imagination of the moment of “discovery,” it is also a re-appropriation of Williams’s account of “discovery.”<sup>4</sup> In this doubling of historical and literary revisionism, a new sense of subjectivity emerges from native interpretations of the trans-Atlantic voyages. The sense of subjectivity is alarming, for it is taken from the perspective of a “simulated *indian*,” the well-known Chippewa/Ojibway novelist and critic Gerald Vizenor. It is revisionist,<sup>5</sup> for the novel is pub-

<sup>2</sup> The use of “the Americas” corresponds with the current re-configuration of the continents that spread across North America, Central America, and South America to designate a hemispheric conception of the New World. Please refer to José David Saldívar’s *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Vizenor refuses the identity of the “Indian,” which he regards as a simulated non-entity. That is to say, there are no “Indians.” Instead, he uses the lower-case italicized “*Indian*” to designate the “simulation, a derivative noun that means an absence” (1998: 15). Please refer to “Native Connotations” in *Fugitive Poses* (14-17).

<sup>4</sup> In Williams’s *In the American Grain*, the passage reads: “On Friday, the twelfth of October, we anchored before the land and made ready to go on shore. Presently we saw naked people on the beach. I went ashore in the armed boat and took the royal standard, and Martin Alonzo and Vicent Yanez, his brother, who was captain of the *Niña*. And we saw the trees very green, and much water and fruits of divers kinds” (1956: 25). The textual similitude between Williams and Vizenor is evident.

<sup>5</sup> As early as 1609, a revisionist account of the “discovery” was penned by a Peruvian writer, Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, in whose *Royal Commentaries of the Incas* some seamen fortuitously sailed to the New World and informed Columbus of the “discovery” before they died from the hardship on the sea. *The Heirs* could be thus contextualized in the tradition of native resistance. Please see Doris Sommer,

lished in anticipation of the quincentenary of Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas. It is also paradoxically comical, for the Admiral (in the novel) is cast in the trickster figure of "an obscure crossblood" (1991: 3).<sup>6</sup> In other words, the Admiral of the Ocean Sea is represented as an American *indian*.

Vizenor is known for trickster discourse. In *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literature* (1989), he states:

The tribal trickster is a liberator and healer in a narrative, a comic sign, communal signification and a discourse with imagination [...]. [S]ocial science is a trope to power, [but] the trickster is a language game in a comic narrative. (187)

Noted for his theory of trickster discourse and comic signs, Vizenor is enlisted in the forum of the postmodern. For him, "there are four postmodern conditions in the critical responses to Native American Indian<sup>7</sup> literatures" (1989: ix), and they are the aural performances, the sense of hyperreality in translation,<sup>8</sup> the pose of the trickster's signature, and the narrative chance in the novel (ix). Emphatically opposed to the representationist interpretation of tribal lore made by social scientists such as anthropologists, Vizenor stresses the communal and the comic in trickster discourse. For him, the "comic and communal sign" of the trickster acts out a "freedom of doing" (13), which provokes a "communal sign and creative encounter in a discourse" (13). In other words, it is the action, the doing, literally the "trickstering" that Vizenor sees as central to trickster discourse. Citing Joseph Meeker, who regards the Greek deity Comus as the origin of comedy and sees comedy as "a strategy for survival," involving "an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play" (1997: 15-17),<sup>9</sup> Vizenor maintains that the trickster "animates human adaptation in a comic language game" (14).

The comic sign penetrates the discourse of *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), Vize-

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"Mosaic and Mestizo: Bilingual Love from Hebreo to Garcilaso," in *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999) 61-91.

<sup>6</sup> Being synonymous with "mixedblood," "crossblood" is of Vizenor's own coinage.

<sup>7</sup> Despite his distrust of the simulated *indian*, Vizenor keeps the conventional term of "Native American Indian literatures" in the preface (ix).

<sup>8</sup> Vizenor's skepticism in translation derives from the anthropological intervention in tribal cultures. For him, anthropologists read tribal literature as "representation," which is then encoded in their "hyper-real" translation of tribal ethnographies.

<sup>9</sup> Please refer to *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic* (1997), in which Meeker relates comedy to animal play, reads *Hamlet* as a comedy, and argues for a "play ethic" in contrast to the Protestant work ethic.

nor's fourth novel. Featured is Stone Columbus, the heir of the Admiral, who is the host of a talk radio program and a bingo barge. The barge is named the *Santa Maria Casino*, along with the other voyage vehicles, the *Niña*, presently a restaurant, and the *Pinta*, a tax free market. In his wild imagination over the waters, Vizenor not only turns the Admiral into a "crossblood" *indian*, but also sets his story of encounter at the headwaters of the Mississippi River, where Vizenor's Anishinaabe ancestors have lived for centuries. The story of "discovery" is thus turned into one of "heirship":<sup>10</sup> if Columbus is a crossblood *indian*, the landing of 1492 signifies a moment of homecoming. That is to say, Columbus does not "discover," but "returns" to the New World. In Vizenorian terms, the Admiral is native American, for he "[bears] the tribal signature of survivance<sup>11</sup> and [ascended] the culture of death in the Old World" (*The Heirs* 3). It is in the imagination of a "tribal" New World that the sense of "newness," as Homi Bhabha has argued (1994: 216-23), "enters the world."<sup>12</sup> The place of Point Assinika conjures up an imaginary Tribal New World—"the first nation in the histories of the modern world dedicated to protean humor and the genes that would heal" (*The Heirs* 119). As Arnold Krupat points out, the "heirs of Columbus" are committed to "healing by means of the humor in stories" (2000: 170).<sup>13</sup> The trickster figure of Columbus is then, in Vizenor's words, "a liberator and healer in a narrative, a comic sign, [and a] communal signification" (*Narrative Chance* 187).

This paper argues that by enacting "opposition play," Vizenor comments on the legacy of Columbus in contemporary trans-Atlantic imaginations. The notion of "opposition" is twofold: on the one hand, it signifies the tribal perspective of the story of encounter; and on the other, it denotes tribal resistance. That is to say, I argue that Vizenor enacts a tribal discourse of encounter in the comic and communal sign of the trickster figure of Admiral Columbus. By turning the Admiral into a crossblood Jewish Mayan trickster, Vizenor transforms the tragedy of clash into a comedy of trickstering. This bold imagination not only strikes a chord with postmodern (and postcolonial) revisionism, but also answers the call of literature to "change the world." Vizenor cites Sartre in the preface of the novel: "We are no longer with those who

<sup>10</sup> Of course, we should take into consideration the "intercourse" between Columbus and Samana. For the episode on Samana, please see the first chapter "Santa Maria Casino," especially 4-10.

<sup>11</sup> "Survivance" is another Vizenorian term, denoting the integration of "survival" and "resistance."

<sup>12</sup> Please refer to Bhabha's "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times, and the Trials of Cultural Translation" in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 212-34.

<sup>13</sup> Please see Arnold Krupat, "Stories in the blood: Ratio- and Natio- in Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*" in A. Robert Lee, ed., *Loosening the Seams: Interpretations of Gerald Vizenor* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green SU, 2000) 166-77.

want to possess the world, but with those who want to change it.” My reading of the novel contends that the Vizenorian play of opposition aims to “change the world” *via* the trickster comedy of a Tribal New World.

Moreover, by letting Columbus “return” to the New World, Vizenor reflects on the trans-Atlantic intercourses from the tribal perspective. As he indicated in a conversation with A. Robert Lee, the interlocutor in *Postindian Conversations* (1999),<sup>14</sup> he is disquieted by the alleged migration myth of natives crossing the Bering Strait. For Vizenor, “that tidy bit of cultural arrogance denies the origin myths of natives, the traditional myths that natives emerged from the earth here” (1999: 128). Dissatisfied with the Eurocentric account of Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas, Vizenor imagines the trans-Atlantic migrations from the tribal point of view:

Christopher Columbus was not the only traveler who had the enthusiasm and maybe stupidity to set sail in search of another continent. Natives, in fact, found him centuries earlier. My idea, you see, is that natives probably landed generations earlier in Europe and the Mediterranean. Natives, in fact, might have taught people everywhere how to build pyramids, how to do all sorts of things. (128-29)

By “turning histories around” (129), Vizenor makes Columbus come home to the New World and thus accents tribal opposition. By diverging from the cultural arrogance of Eurocentric myths, Vizenor contends that natives do not come from another continent, as proposed by Western anthropologists. Rather, they are “of” the earth; they are indigenous. Employing this notion of tribal indigeneity, Vizenor creates a discourse of trans-Atlantic trickstering that takes Columbus home to North America. In this way, as Vizenor puts it, “Columbus was a crossblood, a descendant of the ancient natives, and he was teased by this inheritance to return to his ancestral homeland” (*Postindian Conversation* 129).

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<sup>14</sup> Lee is also the editor of two important volumes of Vizenor scholarship: *The Shadow Distance* (1994) and *Loosening the Seams* (2000).

stering, taking cues from Hermes, the messenger of Zeus, who is himself a trickster. By relating the Western discourse of prerational play to the tribal tradition of trickstering, I maintain that the notion of “trickster play” is as “playful” as Greek mythological figures, and that the tribal élan of play could be regarded as “Native American *homo ludens*,”<sup>15</sup> Vizenor himself being a major player. The second part of the paper gives a thematic reading of the text to illustrate the discourse of trickster play. It will treat, in particular, three strands of the plot: the legacy of Columbus and Pocahontas; the positive use of modern technology, including radio, laser shows, and genetic research; and the establishment of a utopian Stone Nation at Point Assinika. The paper will conclude with a reading of the epilogue and argue that the novel could be read as Vizenor’s trickstering of a Tribal New World.

## I. Trickster Play

While this trans-Atlantic revisionism of Columbus coming home to the New World centers on the tribal tradition of trickstering, I would like to explore its theoretical relationships to the conception of prerational play in the West. The latter is most evidently related to the Greek mythological figure of Dionysus. In *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (1989), Mihai Spariosu elaborates on the history of play in Western thinking and traces its pre-Socratic origin as a form of power: “the violent, arbitrary, and ceaseless movement or *play* of physical Becoming” (6). This movement of Becoming was soon to be replaced by Plato and his followers with an “abstract, ideal, and immutable order of transcendental Being” (6). The transformation of play from “the notion of immediate physical force” (as in the Greek words, *agon* and *athlon*) to *paidia*, “the harmless play of children” (6), and then to “a philosophical term for nonviolent cultural play” in the time of Plato (6), emblemizes a mentality that values reason and dismisses body. While it is clear that play undergoes a change from a potent and physical force of Becoming to a subdued and intellectual order of Being, Spariosu points out that prerational play is “unthinkable” in the wake of reason. It has been

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<sup>15</sup> The term is taken from Huizinga, who argues that instead of *homo sapiens*, the human species (“man the wise”), or *homo faber*, the human maker, *homo ludens*, “Man the Player,” should be studied in Western culture (Foreword).

sidestepped as the Other in Western thinking. He adds, “this utopian, or rather atopian, quality of play as the Other of Western metaphysics cannot be approached with critical or analytical tools” (3).

While the contrast between Becoming and Being highlights the difference between prerational and rational notions of play (Spariosu 7-15), it is the return of prerational play that scholars such as Johan Huizinga (1951) and Victor Turner (1982) have argued for in their otherwise rather rational works. Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1951) tries to rationalize the play element in the West and maintains that “culture bears the character of play” (Foreword). Huizinga defines play as an exercise of “freedom” (8) and as “a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (8). Interestingly, Huizinga’s conception of play is congruent with Spariosu’s explication of play, which contains four major characteristics: chance-necessity, mimesis-play, as-if simulation, and freedom (Spariosu 15-21). Likewise, Huizinga regards play as being paramount in the Hellenic society and having incorporated diverse forms from tragedy to comedy (144-45). The exuberant and unreal sense of play came to a high point in the works of Friedrich Schiller, who stated in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) that “man plays when in the full meaning of the word he is man, and he is only completely a man when he plays” (qtd. in Spariosu 59). While the Schillerian “play-instinct” is as commonly observed as in children’s doodling, Huizinga points out that it is also celebrated in ancient Greek ritual drama (Huizinga 168-69).

If Huizinga relates the unreal, “as-if,” and “make-believe” element of play to ancient ritual drama, Victor Turner gives perhaps the most lucid speculation on the relationship between play and ritual. In *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982), Turner delineates the ceremonial process in tribal society, which he, following Van Gennep, divides into three phases: separation, transition and incorporation (24). Turner argues that the transition phase could be configured as “a sort of social limbo” (24), and divides the “liminal phase” (26) into the liminoid and the liminal. He further contends that it is the former, which is capable of generating the freedom that is conducive to the creation of new symbolic forms. In addition, these symbolic forms are playful: “it is the analysis of culture into factors and their free or ‘ludic’ recombination in any and every possible pattern, however weird, that is of the essence of liminality, liminality *par excellence*” (28).

While Turner’s notion may give rise to the current interest in the liminal, I would like to shift the focus to Asian American critic Cynthia Sau-ling Wong and her discus-

sion of “Asian American *Homo Ludens*.” In her book *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993), Wong, by tracing the ludic discourse back to Kant and Schiller, argues that the notion of play lies at the heart of Western aesthetics. It reached a high point in nineteenth century German idealism, which emphasizes mental capacity, a force of transcendence that goes beyond the physical limitations of the body (Wong 182-85). Play has, however, been pitted against work in the Western tradition because it does not carry any use value in production.<sup>16</sup> Wong quotes Roger Caillois, who states that “play ‘creates no wealth of goods’: ‘play is an occasion of pure waste’” (qtd. in Wong 184). Wong, however, makes an insightful observation on play in relation to the minority group known as Asian Americans. She argues that, in a racially stratified society such as the United States, “the potentiality for writing, artistic creation, play, self-actualization, extravagance, is placed in white society, not in the ethnic culture” (177). In other words, the racial division between whites and nonwhites resonates with that between art (play) and work. That is to say, as ethnic Asians are valorized for their “utility value” (Wong 184), the play of art is privileged for whites—and whites only.

While Wong pays attention to the complicated relationships between racial stereotyping and artistic creativity, her notion of “Asian American *homo ludens*” could be extended to Native Americans and become “Native American *homo ludens*.” As in the case of Asian Americans, who “feel compelled to invoke the concept of free play to make room for creativity” (Wong 185), native writers have been engaged in artistic productions that gave rise to the term “Native American Renaissance.”<sup>17</sup> Vizenor, whose works have been widely anthologized, has received criticism in terms of “ecstatic strategies” (Owens 1992), “mythic verism” (Ruppert 1995), and “loosening the seams” (Lee 1999). I maintain that Wong’s notion of “extravagance” could be applied to Vizenor in the sense that he is indeed, as in the words of A. Robert Lee, “a Native American Renaissance virtually in his own right” (2000: 3). That is to say, if play is synonymous with art, Vizenor has been an extravagant player in the realm of Native American artistic expressions. To put it another way, he is indeed a notable practitioner of Native American *homo ludens*.

The notion of “Native American *homo ludens*” could be further understood in

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<sup>16</sup> According to Spariosu, it is Schiller who “sets the pattern” of “polarity” between play and work (Spariosu 59).

<sup>17</sup> Please refer to Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1983), which reads the works of N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, and Gerald Vizenor as representatives of the Native American Renaissance.

terms of the ludic figure of the trickster. The trickster, in the words of Paula Gunn Allen, is a “presence who is male and female, many-tongued, changeable, changing and who contains all the meanings possible within her or his consciousness” (qtd. in Ammons xii). In other words, it is a life force of becoming, engaged in a process of ceaseless metamorphoses. Alanna Kathleen Brown argues that “the trickster, whether Coyote, Raven, or Rabbit, has always had the power through cunning, and observation to destroy, to create, and to survive” (1994: 126).<sup>18</sup> This trickster play of “physical Becoming” (Spariosu 6), or of what Brown regards as “trickster energy” (128),<sup>19</sup> could be related to figures as ancient as Hermes in Greek mythology. William Doty in his article “A Lifetime of Trouble-making: Hermes as Trickster” designates six trickster traits of Hermes: he is marginal, erotic, creative, comic, and has something to do with thievery and hermeneutics (1997: 46). In telling a Lucian tale of Hermes—when the deity was once “employed as sort of tourist guide to Hades” and showed Menippus the “bare skull of Helena,” to which Menippus responded: “Well, is *this* what launched a thousand ships from every part of Greece?” (qtd. in Doty 61)—Doty emphasizes the Hermetic function of making a connection. That is, Hermes serves as a point of connection between the living and the dead, and while doing so, he makes it playful. This function of “connectedness” could be related to thievery as well. As Lewis Hyde observes, it is Hermes who steals the cattle from Apollo and retrieves the daughter of Demeter from the underworld (1998: 13).<sup>20</sup> While it is easy to see that Hermes is a transgressor, it is important to point out that he steals for the sake of a benevolent cause so that the daughter could be rejoined with the mother. The act of stealing could be then interpreted as the making of an ethical connection between the daughter and the mother. That is to say, Hermes steals to heal.<sup>21</sup>

Felipa Flowers in *The Heirs of Columbus* could be likened to Hermes in that she “would rather poach than represent law and marriage in San Francisco” (*The Heirs* 45). She is involved in the detection of the stolen “bear paw and otter pouches” (45) and the bones of Columbus. Felipa is indeed, in the words of Vizenor, a “trickster poacher” (50), a “tribal liberator who poached tribal remains from museums to atone for the

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<sup>18</sup> Please refer to “Mourning Dove, Trickster Energy, and Assimilation-Period Native Texts” in *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons et al (Hanover, NH.: UP of New England, 1994) 126-36.

<sup>19</sup> Brown reads Mourning Dove’s transcription of Salish oral tales to English during the assimilation period (1880-1934) as an example of “trickster energy” to “create a new order out of chaos” (128).

<sup>20</sup> Please refer to *Trickster Makes the World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: North Point, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Another famous thief is Prometheus, who steals fire from gods for the benefit of men (Hyde 6).

moral corruption of missionaries, anthropologists, [and] archaeo-necromancers” (50). With the help of Transom, a tribal tent shaker, Felipa fetches not only the four medicine pouches, but the silver casket that contains the remains of Columbus (61). While the tragedy of clash is transformed to a comedy of thievery, the tribal stories are liberated and told again at the headwaters of the great river (61). Like Hermes, Felipa “steals to heal.”

As William Hynes and William Doty contend in *Mythical Trickster Figures* (1997), there is a wide range of trickster figures around the world: Yoruba Eshu in Africa, Greek Hermes in the West, tribal Coyote in North America, and Chinese Monkey in Asia (2-3). While the identity of the comical figure is hard to depict, Hynes and Doty believe that “there are sufficient inherent similarities among these diverse figures” (2). Likewise, Lewis Hyde argues that the “trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox” (1998: 7). While the notion of ambiguity could be related to the forces of “physical Becoming,” the ceaseless movements of *athlon*, Vizenor offers his view:

The tribal trickster is a comic *holotrope*, the whole figuration; an unbroken interior landscape that beams various points of view in temporal reveries [...]. The trickster is comic nature in a language game, not a real person or “being” in the ontological sense. (qtd. in Owens 251)

The holotropic figure of the trickster is essentially, as Hyde points out, a “boundary-crosser” (7). As the deity of the crossroads, making connections amidst diverse roads, the trickster is also “polytropic.” It is the deity of the threshold, the liminal, crossing the boundaries. That is to say, the trickster is one who is constantly “on the road” and “going to places.”<sup>22</sup> While Hyde sees the trickster as the “imagination in action” (14), it signifies a will to action, manifesting the power of mobility and transgression. Moreover, it is important to point out the effect of action and of “doing.” As Vizenor argues,

The trickster is outside comic structure, “making it” comic rather than inside comedy, “being it.” The trickster is agonistic imagination and aggressive liberation, a “doing” in narrative point of view and outside the

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<sup>22</sup> “Going-to-places” dominates in the actions of the novel: while Columbus crosses the ocean to come home to the Americas, Felipa goes to Europe to retrieve the bones of Pocahontas and Columbus.

imposed structure. (*Narrative Chance* 13)

In other words, it is the “doing” or the “trickstering” that I would like to emphasize with the Vizenorian term “trickster discourse.” As Alan Velie argues in “The Trickster Novel,” “tribal stories do not take place early or late, in spring or fall, in one year or another; they just happen” (1989: 125).<sup>23</sup> It is the “happening” that captures the prerational notion of play as “ceaseless movement,” or “physical Becoming.” Viewing trickstering as a “doing” or a “making” of a multiplicity of actions, I argue the Vizenorian trickstering hinges on an active, mobile, and transgressive “happening.” In other words, it is not the “meaning” but the “doing” that deserves our attention.

While the difference between “making it” and “being it” reminds us of that between prerational play (a ceaseless force of Becoming) and rational play (an intellectual order of Being), the prerational notion of play has undergone a revival in the discourse of the postmodern. As critics like Fredric Jameson find fault with the notion of postmodern play, denouncing it as synonymous with pastiche, depthlessness, and decentralization, I counterargue that the postmodern notion of play is deep-seated in the Western tradition. It is the return of prerational play that Spariosu perceives as the dominant trend in modern philosophy since the end of the eighteenth century. Siting Nietzsche at the heart of the trend, Spariosu maps how “play steadily moves toward the center of [...] theoretical discourse” (1989: 1) in a movement that starts with Kant and Schiller. Its postmodern resonance could be evidenced in the works of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, who emblemize “a ‘return’ to prerational concepts of play” (Spariosu 20) in their respective conception of the “free play of the signifier” and the “philosophy of becoming.”<sup>24</sup> That is to say, the postmodern could be reconfigured as the “renaissance” of prerational play. With its postmodern flair, prerational play is “reborn” to blur reality, shatter reason, and unsettle the project of Enlightenment.

As Vizenor says, “the postmodern condition is not literature on trial but a liberation of tribal stories” (1989: xii). He regards play as “grand games, a lightness without the imperatives of realism,” while citing the “four appeals” from Milan Kundera (1989: xiii).<sup>25</sup> In contrast to “formal realism,” Alan Velie contends that Vizenor could

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<sup>23</sup> Please refer to “The Trickster Novel,” in *Narrative Chance* (121-39), in which Velie gives a Bakhtinian reading of Vizenor.

<sup>24</sup> For Spariosu’s elaboration on the Derridean and Deleuzean notions of play, please see pp. 143-63.

<sup>25</sup> The four appeals are play, dream, thought and time.

be likened to Rabelais via the Bakhtinian term of “fantastic realism” (1989: 128-29). Velie argues for a sense of commonality between the two: “like Rabelais, Vizenor uses ‘laughter linked to genres of rogue, fool and crown’ in the form of the discourse of trickster” (1989: 130). Moreover, as Velie argues, “Vizenor conceives of trickster as a product of language, who must be seen in a linguistic context” (1989: 131). That is to say, Vizenor’s trickster comedy is a “language game,” a “comic holotrope.”<sup>26</sup>

My reading of *The Heirs of Columbus* argues for a sense of extravagance<sup>27</sup> that is formed and informed by the prerational play of the trickster figure of the Admiral Columbus. With the return of prerational play, I argue that Vizenor is engaged in a trickster discourse that aims to subvert the “terminal creeds” of the West. Thus, Vizenor’s “trickster discourse” of “comic holotropes and language games” is not an outlandish trickery of the postmodern. Rather, it is the “doing” of prerational play and tribal trickstering.

## II. The Heirs of Columbus

In the following, I will give a thematic reading of *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991). Along with the other two heirship stories, *The Trickster of Liberty: Tribal Heirs to a Wild Baronage at Petronia* (1988) and *Bearheart: The Chronicle of Heirship* (1978, 1990), *The Heirs* thematizes major concerns of Vizenor as a trickster player: cross-blood heritage; tribal sovereignty; oral discourse; the primal animals of bear and crow; the chance-necessity of gambling; mythical conceptions of time and space; the healing of children and women; the benevolent use of modern technology; distrust of the white legal system; and finally, pessimism in the white civilization of “terminal creeds.” In addition, his art of the “trickster novel” is characterized by the traits of an episodic structure; a ludic style and a comic voice; the third person point of view; archetypal characters; and interrelated plots and characters.

*Bearheart*, the first novel by Vizenor, is arguably the most “angry” among the heirship stories. It was first published in 1978 under the title *Darkness in Saint Louis*

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<sup>26</sup> For another postmodern reading of Vizenor, please refer to Elaine Jahner, “The Trickster Discourse and Postmodern Strategies,” *Loosening the Seams* (38-58).

<sup>27</sup> This “extravagant” writer has produced to date three heirship stories, respectively *The Trickster of Liberty: Tribal Heirs to a Wild Baronage at Petronia* (1988), *Bearheart: the Cronicle of Heirship* (1978, 1990), and *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991).

*Bearheart*. The novel was reissued under a new title, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*, in 1990. It is distinguished by the conspicuous postmodern technique of “novel within a novel”: the major text of the novel is actually a chronicle written by a trickster bear, which is being read by a white woman inspector sent by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The woman comes to deal with tribal issues and is educated by the trickster bear about the darkness of white civilization.

The chronicles involve a pilgrimage of the heirs migrating from the headwaters of the Mississippi River to the Pueblo Chaco Canyon in the Southwest. While the migration is obviously a parody of the westward expansion of Anglo-America, it is also a pilgrimage to a mythical tribal home in the Southwest, where, according to the Pueblo myth, the First Man and the First Woman emerged out of the earth.

The chronicles of the heirs is followed by *The Trickster of Liberty: Tribal Heirs to a Wild Baronage* (1988), which is actually the predecessor of *Bearheart*. *The Trickster* gives the three-generation baronage lineage of the Browne family from their origins at the White Earth Reservation. With Luster Browne and Novena May as the grandparents, Shadow Box Browne and Wink Martin give birth to nine crossblood trickster siblings. The nine children, along with two adoptees, leave home on the reservation and attend to the business of the world. While Griever and China go to China to liberate the chickens in the market, Tune goes to Berkeley to liberate “dogs from medical laboratories” (Owens 253). Tulip is involved in energy-saving and works as a detective. Eternal Flame establishes a scapehouse to heal wounded women on the reservation. While *Trickster* is a highly episodic work, engaged in a holotropic vision of both present and past, it paves the way for the Cedarfair pilgrimage in *Bearheart* and the return of Columbus in *The Heirs*.

By reading *The Heirs* in relation to the other two heirship stories, I argue that they delineate a range of trickster play in the tribal geography that crosses the biographical home in the White Earth Reservation in the headwaters of the Mississippi River; the mythical home in the Chaco Canyon in the Southwest; and the utopian home of Point Assinika in the international waters forming the border between Canada and the United States. As Bradley John Monsma argues in “Liminal Landscapes: Motion, Perspective, and Place in Gerald Vizenor’s Fiction,” the “land survives in Vizenor’s narratives not in representations of reality but as an active participant in linguistic play” (1997: 70).<sup>28</sup> The land as rendered in the narratives of the three homes—biographical, mythical, and

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<sup>28</sup> The article is published in *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 9.1 (summer 1997): 60-72.

utopian—summons up a body of corpus that appropriates the textual types of pilgrimage, frontier, utopia, and crime stories. In other words, they constitute a major revision of Western literary conventions. In the three heirship stories, Vizenor contrasts the Anglo-American “terminal creeds” with tribal trickster play to destabilize the rationalized dominance. By doing so, Vizenor not only subverts the representation of *indians* as the Other, but also dissolves the binarism of the West. In Vizenorian trickster play, the other is no longer the antithesis of the self but itself a deconstructible category that is foreclosed in the notion of the “postindian.”

Since its publication in 1991, *The Heirs of Columbus*, the third of the heirship stories, has encountered controversial reviews. One critic claimed that “it is hardly a novel” (qtd. in Blair 155). Others have seen the novel as “satire, science fiction, [or] fantasy” (155). Blair argues that the novel “mimics and mocks the convention of the murder mystery” (155). It is the genre of the crime story which suits Vizenor’s work. James Ruppert argues that Vizenor is caught between a “mythic awareness” that tends to deviate from “reality” and novelistic conventions that are required to anchor readers in a world they can relate to (1995: 93). In addition, Krupat reads the novel in the light of descent—the lineage defined by birth, the Latin term of *natio*, which means the “claims of birth, descent, and blood inheritance” (166).

While *The Heirs* shares similar concerns with the other two heirship stories, it is important to note its integration of three plot strands: the legacy of Columbus and Pocahontas; the positive use of modern technology, including radio, laser shows, and genetic research in the healing of tribal women and children; and the establishment of a utopian Stone Nation at Point Assinika. In the following, I will explicate each of these in reverse order.

While stone plays a central role in the tribal sense of memory and origin, it is fictionalized as a stone tavern in the novel. Moreover, the major heir of Columbus is named “Stone.” It is clear that stone deserves special attention. In *Dead Voices: Natural Agonies of the New World* (1992), Vizenor writes,

The third manidoo child did not appear to be human in any sense of the word. The last born trickster was a stone, a hard stone. With the birth of the stone there were birds and animals, flowers and insects on the earth. A bear, a bird, a stone could feel at home on the earth for the first time. (*Dead Voices* 25)

In other words, the stone signifies the origin of the earth. It has a lot to do with tribal creation stories. The story is told in the account of the creation of the world by the trickster Naanabozho in *The Heirs*: “The heirs warm the stones at the tavern with their stories in the blood” (5). The stone, then, is a symbol of tribal genesis and inheritance. Stone Columbus claims, “the stone is my totem, my stories are stones; there are tribal stones, and the brother of the first trickster who created the earth was a stone, stone, stone” (9).

In addition, the imaginary nation of Point Assinika is related to stones. While Assinika means “heaps of stone,” Point Assinika is the “place of the stones” (*The Heirs* 170). The establishment of Point Assinika, in other words, signifies the genesis of a Tribal New World: “Point Assinika was declared a sovereign nation on October 12, 1992, by the Heirs of Christopher Columbus” (119). It is the “first nation in the histories of the modern world dedicated to protean humor and the genes that would heal” (119). Being “situated in the Strait of Georgia between Semiahmoo, Washington, and Vancouver Island, Canada” (119), it has “become the wild estate of tribal memories and the genes of survivance in the New World” (119).<sup>29</sup> Having established Point Assinika, the heirs wants to “annex” the United States.

In the “Last Lecture” section of *The Trickster of Liberty*, there is also a tavern, a “tavern and sermon center” managed by Father Mother Browne. In the tavern, natives come and give their confessions. Maire Gee Hailme confesses his sins against tribal children. This is the theme that Vizenor repeats in *The Heirs*, in which the aim of the imaginary Stone Nation of Point Assinika is to heal the wounded children. Likewise, the concern with women is shared by Eternal Flame Browne, who runs a “scapehouse for wounded reservation women” in *Trickster of Liberty*. This theme is repeated by the establishment of the Parthenos Manicure Salon at Point Assinika, where wounded women are healed by hand talkers, Teets and Harmonia.

In contrast with the bleak picture Silko gives us in *The Almanac of the Dead* (1991), in which modern biotechnology is regarded as evil, Vizenor is optimistic about the use of technology in the Tribal New World. As Mogan indicates, the trickster world integrates myth and science; he does not see the conflict between myth and science. Rather, Vizenor envisions the humanistic services that technology is able to

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<sup>29</sup> The theme of the Spanish “discovery” of the New World is satirically tuned up with the New World Symphony by Anthony Dvorak. The recurrence of Anthony Dvorak’s *The New World Symphony* is not accidental. It is the vision of a Tribal New World, which Vizenor has created for children, a nation “that healed with opposition and humor, and without the worries that wounded children” (177).

render to the heirs on the reversion.

Panda is the first tribal robot. He is trained to “heal with humor; his memories held the best trickster stories, and modern variations, that would liberate the wild and heal the bodies of children” (158). The wounded children tell their secrets to the robots, and the robots are tender, responsive, and can remember these children in their stories. Lappet Tulip Browne is also obsessed with windpower; she wants to build a windmill to generate enough power to run the manicure salon, the casino, and the lights on the Trickster of Liberty statue. Hundreds of blue windmills are seen on the pavilion and on the international borders in the Strait of Georgia, where the nation of Point Assinika is located.

Point Assinika, being a Stone Nation, is virtually a trickster nation. Moreover, it is a nation run by radio broadcasts. Stone Columbus is the host and he says “what you hear is what you see” (1989: 8). In other words, this is a world that is formed and informed by verbal exchanges—the essence of tribal oral traditions. As Spariosu points out, “a prerational mentality is a predominantly oral one,” in which “the auditory [takes] precedence over the visual” (1989: 8). In the Stone Nation at Point Assinika, the auditory is more real than the visual: “Radio is real, television is not” (*The Heirs* 8). In other words, Point Assinika is a trickster land that renders real the auditory and the oral traditions.

Lastly, I argue *The Heirs* is characterized by trans-Atlantic exchanges between Europe and the Americas.<sup>30</sup> While Point Assinika is located on the international border between Canada and the United States, the interweaving of the stories of Pocahontas and Columbus harks back to the “international scene” between the Old World and the New World. While the theme of the international is played out in the very imaginary of Point Assinika, a Tribal New World made of stone 500 years after the “discovery,” it is important to turn to the signifier of Columbus himself. In the novel, the Admiral of the Ocean Sea is the central trickster, one who bears the “genetic signature of survivance” (174). He is also a Sephadic Jew, a carrier of genes in the blood, who has come home to the New World to claim the heirship.

In the course of the novelistic action, the theme of the trans-Atlantic is played out

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<sup>30</sup> In addition, he dramatizes Louis Riel, the famous metis rebel in Canada to cast influence on Stone Columbus. Similarly in *The Trickster of Liberty*, the character Coke de Fountain is parodied upon Dennis Banks, the radical leader of the American Indian Movement. The authenticity of alleged Indian writer Jamake Highwater is also parodied in the character Homer Yellow Snow in *The Trickster of Liberty*. In addition, the Statue of Liberty has been replaced by the Trickster of Liberty statue.

by Felipa Flowers, who goes to London to look for the bones of Pocahontas; by Pellegrine Treves, a Sephardic Jewish rare book collector, who helps Felipa with her search; and by Pir Cantrip, a death camp survivor and a wounded Jew, who helps the heirs with the scientific research on the “genetic signature of survivance.” The roles of Felipa, Treves, and Cantrip, with their travels across the Atlantic, manifest an understanding of history that rejects racial stereotyping and American provincialism. By tracing the history of Pocahontas to Europe, Vizenor envisions a Tribal New World stretching between Europe and the Americas. By introducing the theme of the Jewish diaspora, Vizenor connects the story of persecution in the Old World, that is, the Spanish Edict of Expulsion in 1492, which “compelled Jews to leave or convert to Catholicism under threat of death” (*The Heirs* 186), with that of genocide in the New World. Chadwick Allen offers his reading of the trickster-like connection between Europe and the Americas:

Throughout the novel, Vizenor advances the arguments that Christopher Columbus was related to Sephardic Jews through his mother’s line and that Sephardic Judaism represents an Old World tribalism that has survived for over five centuries in what is now the United States. In claiming to be the genetic heirs of a union between an indigenous woman and Columbus, Vizenor’s “crossbloods” claim both New World and Old world tribalism. (109)

At the end of the novel, the remains of Pocahontas and Columbus are buried in the Jewish burial ground of the House of Life. Although the utopian Tribal New World of Point Assinika is located between Canada and the United States, it has an origin that crosses the Atlantic in Europe.

As Louis Owens points out, for Vizenor “some upsetting is necessary” (254). This very notion of “upsetting” is, in my opinion, agreeable with “trickster play” in the sense that Wong has laid out in her reading of ethnic American literatures. While Vizenor’s job is to “attack terminal creeds and loosen the shrouds of identity,” he has been consistent in his heirship stories. As Owens puts it, Vizenor “goes well beyond the ‘contrived depthlessness’ that has been defined as ‘the overwhelming motif in postmodernism’” (1992: 254). On the contrary, he is able to “celebrate the liberated play of postmodernism” (1992: 254). This sense of play is, in Spariousu’s terms, consistent with the prerational tradition of play. Wong argues that while ethnic

Americans “do share in the bourgeois artist’s general predicament of marginalization and disaffection,” they “can hardly abandon questions on the moral and political propriety of play” (185).

While it is moral and political to “play,” Vizenor gives a final twist in the epilogue of the novel. In addition to its episodic structure and animated bibliography, the epilogue is virtually Vizenor’s manifesto on the legacy of Columbus. Instead of representing the Admiral as the “discoverer” of the Americas or the “inventor of the American Dream” (189), Vizenor relates Columbus to the “birth of slavery and crude anthropology in the New World” (184). While he takes issue with the absence of natives in the World Columbus Exposition in 1893, the installation of *El Faro a Colón* in celebration of the quicentary in the Dominican Republic comes also under attack.

Although Vizenor is dissatisfied with the overestimation of Columbus, he is a novelist who keeps faith in the power of “opposition play.” He cites Milan Kundera in *The Art of the Novel*: “the novel is born not of the theoretical spirit, but of the spirit of humor” (185). It is the “spirit of humor” that penetrates *The Heirs of Columbus*, as in the case of Louis Riel. Rather than the image of a tragic tribal hero, who got “executed for treason” (127), the “heirs are comic, [who] got humor, bingo, and great genes” (127). Likewise, rather than the image of the “discoverer” or the “inventor,” Vizenor argues that

Christopher Columbus, no doubt, would rather be remembered as an obscure healer in the humor of a novel and crossblood stories than the simulated quiver in national politics; he deserves both strategies of survival in a wild consumer culture. (189)

If “the humor of a novel and crossblood stories” are the two “strategies of survival,” Vizenor has in the heirship stories recuperated the image of the Admiral from an exploitative explorer to a crossblood Jewish Mayan trickster. While the theme of the Tribal New World underlines the novel, the intended “celebration” is accomplished by the reburial ceremonies for Felipa, Pocahontas, and Columbus: “their remains were sealed in vaults at the House of Life near the base of the Trickster of Liberty” (176). In addition, the construction of the manicure salon and the gene pavilion at Point Assinika helps with the convalescence of wounded women and children in the tribe. Finally, the integration of the Mayan hand-talker, modern technology, and tribal sovereignty overturns the tragedy of clash, making it a comedy

of trickstering. As Stone Columbus states: “we heal with opposition, we are held together with opposition, not separation, or silence, and the best humor [...] is pinched from opposition” (*The Heirs* 176). That is to say, it is “opposition play” that makes possible a Tribal New World.

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### About the Author

Iping Liang received her Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1995 and have since been engaged in the study and teaching of multiethnic literatures of the Americas. Her articles have been published in *The Yale-China Journal of American Studies*, *Tamkang Review*, and *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly*. While being interested in the discursive relationships between literature and geography, she is currently working on research projects involving comparative studies of Ishmael Reed, Gerald Vizenor, and Karen Tei Yamashita.

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Liang, Iping. "Opposition Play: Trans-Atlantic Trickstering in Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*." *Concentric: Studies in English Literature and Linguistics* 29, no.1. 121-41. Print. Vizenor, Gerald. *The Heirs of Columbus*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1991. Print. rich\_text. Allow Comments on this Page. Make Comments Public. Cancel. In *The Heirs of Columbus*, Gerald Vizenor alters the myth of Christopher Columbus and makes him of Mayan descent; one cannot be an innocent and pitiable victim if one is also partially responsible for the atrocity committed. By altering and pre-empting history, Vizenor determines who has the authority to label someone as "victim"; this also creates the potential for the individual to free him-/herself from a binary past which does not allow for anything outside of the conqueror/conquered dichotomy. In his second interview with Laura Coltelli, he states, "I don't consider Col... This item: *The Heirs of Columbus* by Gerald Vizenor Paperback \$17.95. Only 6 left in stock (more on the way). Ships from and sold by Amazon.com. "Vizenor understands the wilder, irrational, half-mad parts of the Discoverer's soul as few people ever have Columbus is appropriated here in an entirely new way, made to be an Indian in service to his Indian descendents." Kirkpatrick Sale, Nation. Read more. Review.