

**Writing in the Oral Tradition:
The Crisis of Self Representation in the American Native Literature:
A Postmodern Reading of Gerald's Vizenor's *Bearheart: The
Heirship Chronicles***

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Abstract

In presenting a native American myth that blends with a postmodern fictional universe, Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* has remained challenging for readers who endeavor to fit it into a paradigm of Western criticism and literature. The particular postmodern substance of *Bearheart* breaks from modern trends in theory, literature and history. Even though the narrative conveys an oral tradition, clearly in its word game, intertextuality, structureless plot and characterization, *Bearheart* invokes the "upsetting" of many notions of truth, identity, language, cultural and literary authority, and authorship. This is posed against not only the theoretical structure of the Western literary text but also against the "cultural specificity" of some Indian values that constitute what Vizenor's calls "tribal creeds." Vizenor's presentation is complex as it also threatens different levels of "terminal theoretical creeds." Whether literary or nonliterary, sacred or secular, oral or textual, tribal or non-tribal, terminal creeds have left sweeping impacts on modern and postmodern histories, ideologies and cultures.

Introduction: Vizenor's Post-modernized Oral Discourse of Writing

Gerald Vizenor is a Native American novelist, poet, playwright, critic, and journalist who has become a controversial figure in the American literature. Vizenor's writings incorporate polemic theoretical concepts, mythological and literary allusions, and poetry, as well as new visions of the Western mainstream literary theory. Although he has ethnic and political reasons for refusing to commit to the well-established Western theoretical norms, or literary genre, being a mixed blood member of the Minnesota Chippewa tribe, his writing is clearly associated with Deconstruction as most manifestly represented by the Derridian Philosophy. Even he is born into an oral culture, Vizenor is usually associated with its latest postmodern tradition, as evidenced by the critics he cites in his works, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Jean-Francois Lyotard to name a few.

Vizenor's fiction and literary writings coincide with his complicated philosophical, oral and theoretical backgrounds. Vizenor's *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1990), specifically, corresponds with his complicated cultural and literary environment as it derives from the complication of Western postmodern thought and the Native American oral tradition. His presentation is complicated as it invokes, also, Western postmodern literary and cultural contexts. Particularly, Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart: the Heirship Chronicles* can be read within what I call a post modernized oral discourse of writing. The narrative with its word game, wild humor, ambiguity, sexual violence, contradictions, transformation, instability and unpredictability of meaning and the unexpected reversal of shapes, concepts, genres and roles- especially in characterization, narration, author and reader's roles- invites a preparation and prior knowledge of the Vizenorean discourse of writing.

Even it is an American native Indian story that emphasizes an oral tradition, *Bearheart* is situated in a postmodern text and context. Vizenor's deploys a magical and mythological setting while structured around series of postmodern strategies. The complicated plot with its intertextuality and word game destabilizes the structure of the story and withholds meaning. What Vizenor is doing in *Bearheart* is constructing a mythical text in a postmodern context. Characters in the novel are strikingly capable of shape shifting, exchanging roles and subverting words and reality in and outside the text.

More clearly, in *Bearheart*, Vizenor develops a narrative with a complicated literary form that blends an oral tradition with a postmodern perception of characterization, plot, author and readers roles, most obviously needed in Vizenor's attack on having static definitions of life, identity and culture, what he calls "terminal creeds." For Vizenor these indicate a tribal way of thinking articulated with a "language whose meaning is fixed, language without creative play" (in Louis Owens 1990, 252). Vizenor's characters are shown to be "victims" of "terminal creeds-" the most obvious example is Belladonna whose personality is shaped through the several processes of inventing the self from tribal "traditional static standards." Vizenor's criticism of having such definitions is an assault upon many well-established concepts which are taken to be "self-evidently true," from a Western hegemonic perspective. In more than one instance Vizenor argues against "terminal creeds," especially when he raises the issue that "language is never innocent and always sets up conditions that require outwitting and thus some upsetting is necessary" (In Linda L. Helstern 1999). In a 1981 interview published in MELUS (8.1) Vizenor explains what he means by "terminal creeds" which for him occurs basically because:

... we're invented from traditional static standards and we are stuck in coins and words like artifacts. So we take up a belief and settle with it, stuck, static. Some upsetting is necessary. (1981, 45-47)

This paper will show how *Bearheart*, with its structureless and deconstructed plot, indeterminate postmodern setting filled with contradiction and ambiguity, mongrel identities- appearing mainly as trickster figures- and an oral ideology with a futuristic and mythical outlook strikes at the foundations of the notion of "truth", "identity" and textuality in the modern Western culture. I argue that even this novel is classified as part of an oral American Indian tradition, its structure, language and ideology invoke deeper revision of postmodern notions of authorship, power/knowledge dichotomy and some theoretical approaches in textual analysis.

Specifically, the paper consists of three parts, each of which is a reflection on the oral and postmodern aspects of *Bearheart*. The first entitled "The Telling was in the Listening, Myths Became the Center of Meaning Again:" Deconstructing "the Structurality of Structure" in *Bearheart*," attempts to construct a theoretical framework for the meta-narrative. Drawing from Deconstruction and Postmodern schools Vizenor builds a discourse of difference that incorporates some basic deconstructive strategies. I will rest my analysis on Jacques Derrida's argument against what he calls the "structurality of structure" with which Derrida attempts to deconstruct the truism, inherent aspects and essentialism of some universalized and collective concepts in the Western text. I argue that by situating such a school of thought against a tribal oral tradition, Vizenor's narrative produces an oral discourse of difference with unlike types of cultural consciousness.

The second part entitled "Setting and Theme: the Metafictional Frame in *Bearheart*" sets the scene of the narrative within an oral postmodern topoi. The setting assembles the story of the demolition of the Indian race, its oral culture and identity, which is allegorically reflected in the epical hilarious journey, described as a pilgrimage. The eerie atmosphere with which this journey is endowed reflects the basic theme: the "darkness of the white civilization". More clearly, the atmosphere in the narrative as rendered imaginary, magical, ghostly and mythical summons up some inherent aspects of the American Indian oral tradition which are substantially represented lesser and substandard in the Western text. Vizenor is drawing "a postapocalyptic" neo postmodern topoi that derives from the Native Indian oral and tribal culture when he presents the tribal world as strikingly quixotic but communal, synchronically prosaic but exotic and paranormal. In this essay the setting becomes a "trope of power" that stipulates or spells out the Indianness of the American Native culture; one that sanctifies

the oral tradition against the modern historical and textual violence of the Western civilization.

The third part, entitled "And transform yourself:" Splendid Characters in *Bearheart*," introduces the trickster figure as the central character of the narrative – and addresses its ability to cross the boundary of the Western theory and its structural characterization and plot. Whereas Vizenor's characters are shown to be "victims" of "terminal creeds," I argue that Vizenor enacts a very specific oral discourse of encounter in the trickster figure who presents an archetypal tribal subversive character. Being a "boundary-crosser" (Hyde 1998, 7) the trickster character rises up against, in Berten's terminology, an "undifferentiated concept of the self" (1995, 30) which more often than not enacts the "predetermined values" and the fixed and archaic representation of the Western identity. The trickster presents an identity which is "a subversion of the Western mode of classification, resisting singularity" (Blaeser 2008, 138) and paradigms of homogenization, and becoming in Vizenor's presentation a prototype of "the dissident". The paper will conclude suggesting that in producing different but fixated types of cultural consciousness and a tentative revision of Western literary conventions and norms, Vizenor's work establishes an oral culture with "sacred centers" and oral paradigms with new literary "structures," echoing different levels of "terminal theoretical creeds," and thus invokes the need for deeper "inquiries" into cultural representations.

"The Telling was in the Listening, Myths Became the Center of Meaning Again:" Deconstructing "the Structurality of Structure" in *Bearheart*

In *Bearheart*, Vizenor develops a threat against the possibility of achieving knowledge through language. Vizenor develops a narrative with a complicated literary form that blends an oral tradition with a postmodern perception of knowledge. Specifically, Vizenor's *Bearheart* engages with the complicated Postmodern conception of truth, language, and textuality and their related connection with meaning and identity. Reflecting on an understanding of M. Foucault's "truth," "power" model and its constitution in the Western knowledge, Vizenor agrees that "the essential political problem" for the author is not to "criticize ideological contents", but that of "ascertaining the possibility of constituting a politics of truth." (M. Foucault, 1994 133). Elizabeth Blair (1995) moves this postulate further when she suggests that in Vizenor's work, one looks for neither "meaning" nor "truth." This might explain why the "didactic and imaginative impulses are constantly at odds in Vizenor's work" (Robert Silberman 13-14). "Truth," as being associated with Vizenor's postmodern conception of language and meaning, has become an elusive, obscure and indefinable term that has been repeatedly deconstructed in the structureless plot in *Bearheart*.

In order to upset or undermine the stability of the Western paradigm of truth, reality and power, *Bearheart* arouses the ideological, historical and cultural difference of the Native American identity: its mixed aspect and hybridity. In what follows I will show how Vizenor's presentation of the native American identity is problematical as it derives from a specific conception of reality and the amalgamation of both the oral and the Western tradition, particularly his definition of postmodernism which uniquely establishes a connection between Western ways of thought and the oral tradition of the American Native culture. In *Narrative Chance*, Vizenor defines postmodernism as "an overture to amend the formal interpretation and transubstantiation of tribal literatures" (1989, 4). He is clearly against the repeated cultural silences of what he calls the "racist denial of tribal languages" (11) which are enforced through Western hegemonic discourses and their complicit apparatuses. What the term implies for Vizenor, may be, is an oral pattern of self consciousness flow which is posed against the Western/American modern understanding of the tribal way of life. However, *Bearheart* shows that when Vizenor attempts to draw a portrayal of his Native American Indian culture, his representation comes according to, or enforced through Westernized theoretical approaches.

Vizenor's engagement with the complicated Postmodern conception of truth, language, and identity and their related connection with meaning and textuality is tackled by some authors who attend to address this inclination in his fiction from different perspectives. Some of the critics who engage this postmodern aspect of Vizenor's work are Elizabeth Blair, Lian Iping, Lynch Tom, Louis Owens, Kerstin Schmidt, Sean Kicummah Teuton, Alan R. Velie, Chela Sandoval and Kathryn Hume. He himself addresses this theoretical approach in his work. In *Wordarrows: Indians and Whites in the New Fur Trade* (1978), Vizenor poses the oral tradition and language against the Western written text when he declares that the "written language has been the privileged weapon of the dominant party in the culture wars since the earliest days of contact; consequently, few of those victimized by it know how to use it." Vizenor invokes the complicated conception of the relation between language, meaning and truth in several other works. Elizabeth Blair's traces his use of "postmodern Language Games" in more than work. Grier: *An American Monkey King in China* (1990) begins with an Octavio Paz epigraph: "Writing is a search for the meaning that writing itself violently expels. At the end of the search meaning evaporates and reveals to us a reality that literally is meaningless." In *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), Vizenor quotes Milan Kundera: "The novel...is the territory where no one possesses the truth" (185). And in *The Trickster of Liberty*, (1988) he negotiates with the concept of "the dissident," raising a postmodern fragmented definition of identity as well as textuality. He believes in a writer

who "experiments with the limits of identity, producing texts where the law does not exist outside language" (155-56). From this postmodern perspective, it is the writer's linguistic experience, not the fixed conception of truth nor a predetermined configuration of identity that is most excellent in the literary text. Even though "language not reality, identity or truth--is preeminent in the postmodern text," (as Blair argues) the issues of language or "words" and the idea of identity- "invented" or not remain problematic in Vizenor's work. Such complicated conception of reality is introduced in a knotty chapter entitled "Word Wars in the Word War" and becomes an essential module of Vizenor's narrative which can be understood within Vizenor's Postmodernized oral discourses.

Even though Vizenor's *Bearheart* invokes new destabilized patterns of representation - intended not to be flowing nor deriving from the rigid Western hegemonic thought theories, ideology and terminology - his idea of truth, its relation to language and meaning, is presented through a concise and conscious understanding of some Western schools and theoretical approaches. Most clearly his work exhibits an understanding of Jacques Derrida's argument which was carried against "the structurality of structure" in his famous "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1986). *Bearheart* is engaged with a presentation that incorporates a deconstructive conceptuality of language, textuality and identity that coheres with Derrida's postulate. The structure, Derrida (1986) argues, has been "neutralized", or rather naturalized, by a process of giving it a "center" or a "fixed origin." For him, this "structurality of the structure" is deconstructed on the basis that

(t)he function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure – one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure- but above all to make sure that the organization principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total forms. (83)

Derrida goes deep in suggesting that "totalization" has no meaning, and sometimes impossible because of the "missing of a center which arrests the grounds and the play of substitutions" (91). This movement of "play" made by lack or absence of a "center" is what Vizenor clearly constructs in *Bearheart*. He focuses on the instability of meaning and on the idea that meaning is very local and subject to change. In doing so, Vizenor's *Bearheart* investigates authority in the text as conceived in a structure, or a "sacred" "center," which does not allow the substitution of its elements or contents. In answering a question about the relationship of his critical writing to his fiction, Vizenor suggests that the main features of his work are "silence, transformation, episodic stories that have

multiplied topic with a kind of center but no closure" (Miller 1995, 78). Specifically, in negotiating with "structurality of structure" Vizenor examines some cultural, social, political and ideological phenomena which are insistently taken to be "self-evidently true." These could be understood as a form of cultural hegemony imposed by the modern Western scholarship. Vizenor attempts to deconstruct the "self-evidence" of some universalized concepts by highlighting their local and historical nature.

The "unpredictability" and "indeterminacy" of meaning in *Bearheart* is thus a true application of the tenant that meaning is found in the "difference" between words and the things they designate. And as the signifier is constantly "floating free" of the object which is assumed to name; meaning in *Bearheart* cannot be arranged in sets of structural patterns or paradigms. The writer is deliberately in a process of deconstructing many of the cultural, social and political "centers;" binary opposition relations, paradigms and essentialist configurations; the fact that has resulted in a fragmented, a-historical and destabilized story with relativistic and indeterminate components and relations. In other words, employing the theoretical terminology of the deconstruction school, *Bearheart* presents a text without "positive terms;" the text turns to be an object with a series of structureless "differences" that generate meaning which cannot be fully grasped or arranged in structural sets or patterns. The narrative suggests that all the attempts to have a center, a ground or a system as a basis for an absolute meaning is something illusionary and hard to obtain. Consequently, meaning in *Bearheart* is not fixed and cannot be found in the theme or in the authorial intention. Meaning is flexible, unstable, contradictory and illusionary.

"Some upsetting is necessary," this is how Vizenor portrays his writing. "Upsetting" is a key strategy that he employs in order to destabilize the well-established patterns of "discovery," colonization and "settlement" incorporated in the Western text which are posed as counter narratives to the magical realism of the Indian oral tale. "I conceived of it as an episodic journey obliquely opposed to Western manifest destiny;" this is how Vizenor introduces *Bearheart* to his audience. He destabilizes the fixed structure of the journey motif he employs in his narrative when he presents it as "a kind of parallel contradiction, of Indians moving south and southwest rather than west. What they're traveling through is the ruins of western civilization, which has exhausted the petroleum, its soul" (in Robert A Lee 2002). His selection of "a trickster narrative" with characters with multiple roles and shifting aspects - who are situated at a "war word" atmosphere (an important aspect of the oral tradition) rather than textual or structural content- destabilizes the well-established "structurality" of the Western novel. This entails seeing the tribal store of knowledge in *Bearheart* as orally constructed, or structurally deconstructed in a postmodern state of

playfulness, spread in an unstable setting lacking its most significant "sacred centers" or positive terms, to echo Derrida again in this context.

"Living is more than death and evil is less than goodness... Winning is Losing:" Words are in a Playful "Strange Balance" in *Bearheart*

Bearheart, like most of Vizenor's fiction, is "a trickster narrative." It is a "postapocalyptic allegory of mixed blood pilgrim clowns afoot in a world gone predictably mad" (Owens 1990, 248). The trickster character, a central element in oral tradition and Western mythology and literature, is employed to destabilize the structurality of meaning in the narrative. Relying on such a deconstructionist strategy *Bearheart* is enabled to pose a decentered definition of the self which is posed against the Western homogenizing and hegemonic values. Vizenor is against a "reductionist definition of being that would deny possibilities of the life-giving change and adaptations at the center of traditional tribal identity" (Owens 1990, 250). In employing such a school of thought together with a tribal oral tradition, Vizenor's narrative produces an incongruent oral discourse of difference with disparate modes of cultural consciousness, in Fourth Proud Cedarfair's words "God is an ordeal, evil is not" (133).

This postmodern theoretical background is clearly incorporated in a chapter entitled "Word Wars in the Word Wards," in *Bearheart*. When the pilgrims arrive at the Bioavaricious Regional Word Hospital, the "breakdown in communication" has caused the creation of this word hospital. The word hospital "was programmed for possible breakdowns" (*Bearheart* 168). "Words" in this hospital are loosely identified as they become without sacred centers, especially when the narrator employs negation to determine and define what "words" are. In this postmodern context words are defined from an oral traditional perspective as "not silence." They are "[m]ore open than closed, less secret, little political" (*Bearheart* 161). In this context, words, become an act against "the structurality of structure" that produces conclusions like "Nonfacts were more believable," (*Bearheart* 162) and fit more appropriately in this postmodernized oral discourse of writing.

In such a conceptuality, as endowed with a very specific "tribal cosmos" (132), "words" become devoid of political meaning and posed in a scale that determines the degree of their secrecy or flight of the imagination. In a Native American work, the oral aspect of language extends modern opposites like good/evil dichotomy into their postmodern rebellious structure, and thus generating conclusions like "And so we are equal opposites" (132). Accordingly in *Bearheart* the meaning of life is preserved in a similar oral process as "[s]urvival on the interstate was more verbal than spiritual" (161). Oral tales were uttered about "fools and tricksters and human animals" replacing the fixed

modern conceptuality of heroism and its essentialist conception of power relations. This clarifies the lack of sacred centers in this Regional Word Hospital where "myths became the center of meaning":

Facts and the need for facts had died with newspapers and politics. Nonfacts were more believable. The listeners traveled with the tellers through the same frames of time and place. The telling was in the listening... Stories were told about fools and tricksters and human animals. Myths became the center of meaning again. (Bearheart162)

Standing hand in hand, Justice Pardone and Doctor Wilde decide not to leave the word hospital: "This is our last chance to be part of the real word," said Justice Pardone. We readers might have heard it world, but it is the "word" which is "the meaning of living now ... The word is where the world is at now" said Doctor Wild (170-171). In such a narrative the oral tradition with its playfulness is empowered and is intended to replace the ancient history of literacy and its predetermined conceptuality of truth which is played in such a narrative to bring "cultural death" and real wars to the human race. This refers to the significance of the oral tradition which could be a spiritual solution to the "breakdown in language and government services," (Bearheart166). In the Preface to *Earth Divers* Vizenor explains this theoretical standpoint reflecting on how cultural patterns imply static centers which might hinder "the search for a postmodern aesthetic" or establishing what Lyotard calls "a new literary order." For Vizenor this could be achieved in creating what he calls "imagined order" that might change the role of authorship and readers response. As Vizenor himself says in the Preface to *Earthdivers*, "creation myths are not time bound, the creation takes place in the telling, in present-tense metaphors." For Vizenor this is an inherent aspect of an oral tradition which becomes a fundamental basis for a postmodern culture. Owens explains this aspect:

In the oral tradition a people define themselves and their place in a universe of imagined order, a definition necessarily dynamic and requiring constantly changing stories. The listeners recreate the story in the act of hearing and responding. ... Predetermined values represent stasis and thus cultural death. (Owens 1990, 252)

According to such a presentation, a postmodern identity is "a matter of language." Vizenor follows Charles Russell when he argues that postmodern identities are "recast in terms of the essential workings of language, especially in the variance of language and difference, and the shifting grounds of all discourse. Postmodern creation is expressed in the acceptance, even glorification of play, chance, indeterminacy, and self-conscious performanc" (Vizenor 1989, 192). For example in breaking the "structurality of structure" in *Bearheart*,

Vizenor incorporates the idea that "good and evil were in a strange balance" (132) the idea that is destabilized in Fourth Proud Cedarfair's concluding sentence: "Good is an ordeal, evil is not" (133) and in his lamentation that "You are all still losers... Terminal believers in your own goodness" (133). The evil gambler's concluding statement exhibits how a destabilized postmodern narrative breaks down the static and binary essentialist role of the functions of "constitutional government and the political organizations" which were deemed "deceptive games of evil." He presents more "upsetting" when he suggests in a Shakespearean style a very "playful" idea:

Personal games became public programs. National games that preserved and protected the causes of evil... Nothing but the loss of faith among gambling fools. Nothing but chance. Fools and the games with their fantasies that living is more than death and evil is less than goodness... Winning is losing. (132)

Bearheart shows how such deconstructive tools work at various levels in the narrative. The process of destabilizing some of the binary oppositions such as white /Indian, male /female, nature/culture, modern/postmodern and others is achieved through the deconstruction of their "sacred centers." In another section of this paper the trickster figure in Native American literature will be examined because he, being associated clearly with minority cultures, works well for Native American writings. The trickster character, narrative, or text is, also, the best to destabilize "the sacred centers" of many literary and cultural concepts, including the concept of the hero, the formation of identities and their roles in social organizations.

I have argued, so far, that Vizenor's *Bearheart* attempts to rebel against the dominance of the modern thought and belief. Concepts which are considered "basic given" such as knowledge, identity, history, gender, truth and the notion of literature itself are destabilized as the structure of such notions is seen to be fragmented and displayed in a floating or "playful" state. The upsetting of binary structures, intertextuality and the trickster style of writing are some examples that show how Vizenor accepts some deconstructionist tools in achieving his oral/postmodern outlook. One of the procedures that has been applied truthfully in Vizenor's *Bearheart* is the deconstruction of many concepts established as the basis for binary opposition relational thinking. The fixed construction of the entities of such oppositions is an essentialist structural element in logocentric language which Vizenor attempts to deconstruct in his work. Such oppositions constitute a hierarchy in which the first concept functions as superior and privileged, the other inferior and disadvantaged. *Bearheart* is structured in a way to deconstruct the "structurality" of such hierarchies by destabilizing and placing them in a condition of "undecidability" and "unpredictability." This is an

important step in "upsetting" or decentering the conception of truth which is pervasively patriarchal, white-male, Western and self-centered.

Understandably, then Vizenor believes that the verisimilar accounts of the structuralist theories representing a fixing and limiting force or center has been acting forcefully on the dynamic flow of native American stories and oral experiences. For Vizenor, this can be encountered in two different but related ways: magical realism and the trickster discourse of writing both of which are heavily based on a combination of an oral/ postmodernized structure. Such strategies will be traced in Vizenor's presentation of setting, and characterization and their relation to the idea of terminal creeds in his narrative.

Setting and Theme: the Metafictional Frame in *Bearheart*

Bearheart is about "contemporary tribal people live in a white world." It opens with a preface letter to the reader written by Saint Louis Bearheart who presents "the Heirship chronicles: Proud Cedarfair and the Cultured Word Wars." His invented pilgrimage, from the third world into the fourth, acts on decentering many of the traditional literary and cultural concepts and creeds that are based on Western modern values and rules. Not only the notion of truth is displaced, but also many social and cultural creeds and models such as gender, history, identity and other complicated components like power, knowledge and the concept of literature itself. The novel with its wild humor, sexual violence, contradiction, shape shifting, incredible events and unexpected reversal of cultural and theoretical roles upsets the reader from the first lines. A bear spirit turns into an author presents the hilarious adventures of Proud Cedarfair, his wife Rosina and a group of pilgrims, animals, human beings and spirits journeying into an imagined world. The attack on many stable definitions of what Vizenor calls "terminal creeds" is a basic strategy adopted and maintained by the narrator throughout the novel.

Specifically, *Bearheart* exhibits the different ways with which Indian people reserve the complicated cultural space where memory, imagination and magic and an oral element interact to produce a complicated and hybrid identity. The title of the novel suggests that its major theme is Bearheart's "Heirship Chronicles." It tells a tale of myth situated in a postmodern primitive setting about the ongoing predicament of Native American Indians in the American continent. The atmosphere of the narrative, though mythical and speaks of the Indian oral culture, invokes the modern American cultural and political contexts and its newly born aspect, Postmodernism. The novel is postmodern in its central thematic, dramatic and organizational elements. The "metafictional frame," of *Bearheart*, though most appropriate for an Indian myth, might invoke

postmodern notions of identity, power, gender and above all "the structurality" of the Western text.

The novel can be read as a historian's narrative derived from "tribal archives" a "chronicles," about the predicament of American Indian tribes, their problems, migration- an archetypal journey described as a pilgrimage from an apocalyptic world into a futuristic one- and their vision of a better world. The preface, which sets up "a metafictional frame," serves an imaginative narrative that blends "a native American mythical outlook" with a "semi- science-fictional universe." It is set in an ultramodern realm where emptiness of modern values is replaced with a postmodern ambitious outlook and a de-centered and hovering topoi which revels in fantastic, surprising, magical, exotic and mythological storytelling and storyline elements.

The postmodern configuration of the narrative is also present in the "Heirship" of the title and the main figure and designates the continuity and permanence of the Indian tale and its folkloric myth - through the preservation of the voice of its narrator. Particularly "Heirship" is employed to designate or symbolize the succession, survival and renewal of the idea of "Indianness" but the term's emphasis appears to be, additionally, on the progression and continuity of the Indian predicament in the American continent. The story tells of the instability of an Indian identity, and the structureless plot- with its magically empowered characters- these are key elements in the postmodern novel- reflect the survival and renewal of the Native American race and the sacredness of its mythical and oral story.

The name of the prime fictional narrator, "Bearheart" or "St. Louis Bearheart," who follows an Indian ritual in repeating that he carries the bear in his heart, alludes to a tribal myth of transformation of a human being, particularly an Indian "becoming a bear." This refers to the significance of some tribal myths that incorporate an essential element of magic, power and transformation in figuring personalities. This "bear-becoming" mythical, metaphoric and archetypal element fits, also, appropriately in the postmodern context that draws from the indeterminacy and the floating condition of the human culture, condition and identity.

According to the novel's complicated post-mythical (magical/ realistic) framework, the bear-becoming of Cedarfair is a response to the long and tragic history of American colonization of the continent which has annihilated the life and history of American Indians, their original traditions and culture, and blinded their mixed and mongrel identities. "Their original habitats, their meager reservations ("circus"), their culture, and their identity" have been influenced by the materiality and emptiness of modern values which are tragically and

obscenely juxtaposed with the archaic and primitive values of the Native's oral culture. The narrative hints at the impact the Western civilization has left on modern and postmodern cultures when it suggests how the idea of "indianness" is further aggravated not only by political and global outlooks and their related ideologies but also by ecological and environmental disasters that the American civilization has brought upon the Indian race, the continent and the whole world.

The narrative can be understood as an oral text or as an Indian a-historical document with some tribal "chronicles." The setting of a better and an imagined universe in *Bearheart*, is constantly recreated in the stories, in the telling of mythical narratives and folk tales, and stand strikingly in contrast to the truism of the Western historical narrative. In addition, the blending of the oral, mythical and modern realities invokes a postmodern setting that has the capacity to restore to the memory, the American history of annihilating Native communities and assimilating them into one race, or one cultural entity. The structureless plot- and its main storyline- traces the continuous destruction of their habitat, the deformation of their oral tradition, the blending of national identities and the exploitation of natural resources. What Prude Cedar Fair calls "the Native victims of American expropriation" becomes a significant theme that arises from the meta-narrative.

"And transform yourself:" Splendid Characters in *Bearheart*

Bearheart exhibits the different ways with which Indian people reserve the complicated cultural space where memory, imagination and magical and mythical elements interact to produce complicated and hybrid identities. In what follows I will show how Vizenor's presentation of characters is not only oral but also postmodern as it also destabilizes extra levels of "terminal creeds" exhibited basically in the specific Native Indian's identity and its unconventional way of thought.

As a mixed-genre narrative, *Bearheart* contains an assortment of characters who are given contextualized oral or mythical representations. Vizenor is aware of a crisis in self representation when Native Americans are denied the specificity of their being and the consciousness of its exceptionality. *Bearheart* shows how characterization restores such distinctiveness and inimitability in the different figures in the narrative. While some characters are more important than others, no one is complicated or developed according to the Western conception of heroism in the realistic literary text. However, these characters are endowed with specific traits that cohere with mythical, magical, allegorical, allusive, or illusive tribal values, or according to the oral tradition of the Native Indian culture which adds, also, to the distinctiveness and unique postmodern individuality of these characters.

I have suggested earlier that an oral tradition is appropriate for Vizenor's discourse of writing, because its magical and manifold rituals liberate the written language from the power of fixity. It can - in Bakhtin's terminology - "liberate the object from the power of language "in which it had become entangled as if in a net;" it also builds the supernatural power of myth over language and the word. American Indian oral tradition might release the written word from the power of human consciousness. They "destroyed the thick walls that had imprisoned consciousness within its own discourse, within its own language." (Bakhtin's *Dialogic* (60) in David Patterson, 2014, 8). By situating the tribal, oral tradition within paradigmatic Western discourses of knowledge, Vizenor's approach aspires to produce in Kathryn Hume language "a consciousness different from the Western Enlightenment pattern". In this paper, this is achieved in incorporating an element of magic and the trickster character.

Though the narrative can be understood as a historical or as an archival document that is derived from tribal annals what is referred to as "chronicles," it is an imaginative narrative that appears in the form of the modern magical realism novel with emphasis on typical mythical characters with basic features like magic, transformation and the uncanny behavior. The trickster element is also important and it includes archetypal characters that appear in the myths of many different cultures and civilizations. The trickster figure is appropriate for the mythical and oral structure, plot and theme of Vizenor's narrative. More coherently, the trickster figure is appropriate in the postmodern context of the narrative because as Lewis Hyde describes him as a "boundary-crosser". Vizenor focuses on such a character, as a significant postmodern constituent, because of its ability to cross both physical, topographical and spiritual boundaries and often "breaks societal rules". He is, also, necessary for the narrative theme because he has the capacity to "...violate principles of social and natural order, playfully disrupting normal life and then re-establishing it on a new basis"(dictionary definition). It is also employed as a deconstructive technique because the trickster figure "questions and mocks authority" and the well established patterns of behavior in a society in a candid way. He represents the patriarchal structure and hegemonic hierarchies of Western societies because they are usually male characters who are fond of imposing or "breaking rules," "boasting," and "playing tricks" or power on human beings.

The trickster figure is functional in the narrative and serves the postmodern narrative in more than one way. Through such a figure, Vizenor is allowed to locate a destabilized agency in the trickster's capacity for transgression and metamorphosis and its inclination for mythological and metaphorical adaptations. The idea of "a playful" structure as the basis of the narrative is appropriately presented in such a figure. According to Bell "Tricksters exist on

the borders of splintered lives and divided opposing cultures speaking and healing in a divided cross blood space" (In Sean Teuton185). Such a presentation of personality and setting coincides with Vizenor's philosophical, theoretical and oral backgrounds. According to Kimberly Blaeser (1996) the "Trickster's identity is itself subversion of the western mode of classification, resisting singularity" (138) embodying "contradiction and ambiguity" (ibid 139) and therefore becoming in Vizenor's oral/postmodern context an appropriate device for deconstructing the "structurality of structure" in the Western text. Other writers who address the trickster figure in Vizenor's writing include: Elizabeth Blair, James Flavin, Wolfgang Hochbruch, Lian Iping, Louis Owens, Lewis Hyde, Lowe John, Kerstin Schmidt, Kathryn Hume and Jesus Benito, Chela Sandoval Kathryn Hume Elizabeth Blair, Kerstin Schmidt and Lynch Tom. In an interview by Dallas Miller (1995) and in talking about the trickster story, in specific, Vizenor announces manifestly his theoretical philosophy behind selecting the trickster figure, reflecting again on a postmodern understanding of cultural representations and its relation to a specific postmodern conceptuality of truth:

They are not "true." What I mean is people do not look upon them as "fact" and play that stupid game that modern critics play of, you know is this true or not. (80-81)

It is through the recourse to a complex structurless plot with a trickster personality - that incorporates the mixing of the sacred and the profane, the real and the magical, the historical and the authentic, the mythical and historical, the factual and the fantastic, the familiar and the exotic, the (pre)modern and Postmodern - that Vizenor's exhibits a very specific understanding of history, identity and culture. However, so much of Vizenor's presentation is bounded within the scheme of the binary opposition relations of the modern Western civilization, what he calls "terminal creeds". However, this is presented from an oral cultural perspective, as clearly shown in the distinctive representation of the personalities of both Rosina and Belladonna.

Vizenor's reaction to the abstractedness and extremeness of the presentation of characters in culture of the West is manifested in Rosina's decentered structure of mind. When one of the women of the Scape house asks her questions about "identities," her "dependencies," her "sexual and political responses to men," and her "rituals as a person," Rosina does not have "abstract answers." One of the most significant comments that Vizenor makes about her is that "(H)er life was visual and personal. She did not see herself in the abstract as a series of changing ideologies "(39). Instead of building one's life on "the abstract," testing "instincts of survival" (39) Vizenor develops a counter meta-

narrative in presenting a series of mixed characters whose main role becomes to shock, upset, reverse and destabilize the fixed structure of many sacred notions.

Additionally, one feature of characterization is fragmentation, instability and even decomposition. Each character in the novel has the tendency to develop a certain code and dialect; each is an individual and is shown within a "playful" structure isolated from everyone else, working on a postmodern fashioned individuality in a larger destabilized discourse. The selection of the trickster figure is a significant reflection of this type of characterization. In Vizenor's work, characters lacking this function are inflicted with "terminal creeds" that might kill them as the case with the character of Belladonna.

Vizenor's characters derive deep into the specificity of Native American life experiences. In order to resurrect the older native ways of seeing and acting, characters in *Bearheart* are basically Indian people who preserve the oral space where culture and history encompass memory, imagination and an oral tradition that interacts to create such a hybrid Indian identity. Such a presentation is posed against the Western civilization inclination to materialize the human experience and to fashion a structuralist and immobilized thought and ideology. Nevertheless, such a construction of the Indian identity might be an attack also on the "cultural specificity" of the Indian tribal values that constitutes what he calls "tribal creeds" most obviously shown in the characters of Proude Cedarfair and Belladonna.

The most prominent character, Proude Cedarfair, whose deeds and action form a symposium for the specific Indian cultural and mythical heroism, is portrayed as a medicine man and a shaman, and a repository of tribal knowledge and values. He is a "transmitter" of the customs and traditions of an Indian way of life. Most clearly, his action presents him as a mythical hero basically in his pursuit to become a bear, a mythological motif in Native American literature, specifically in Anishinabe myths. A clear incorporation of an element of humanism (from the Western perspective) is added to his national (Indian) and mythical heroism.

When Old Bearheart is asked what his novel was about, he declares that traveling through "terminal creed," and "social deeds" "into an imaginary world where bears have their own language." Louis Owens (1992) explains "terminal creeds" are the "beliefs which seek to fix, to impose static definitions upon the world. Whether these static definitions arise out of supposedly "traditional" Indian beliefs or out of the language of the privileged Euro/American knowledge, they represent what Bakhtin terms an "authoritative discourse" whose language "indissolubly fused with its authority –with political power as a prior utterance" (231). In other words, they are beliefs that limit one's ability to

go beyond the traditions and the accepted norms. For Vizenor such beliefs are destructive, suicidal, even when the definitions come into being out of an oral tradition or a sacred ritual.

Bearheart is an explicit threat against those who are dominated by "terminal creeds." Belladonna is the prominent figure that shows how an abstract and romantic vision of one's identity is destructive. When the pilgrims come to Orion, a walled town that imposes condition for admission, the inhabitants of this town, the descendants of famous hunters and western bucking-horse breeders demand information about places of birth, identities and families, education and experience, travels and diseases, attributes on women and politics and ideologies (*Bearheart* 190). This chapter, with its detailed elaboration on the conceptuality of "terminal creeds," clarifies what Vizenor intends basically in his book.

Relying on such a concept, the binary opposition White/Indian, is destabilized raising profound questions about "Indianness" in specific, and native American culture and literature in general. When the hunters and the breeders demand that one of the pilgrims make a speech, Belladonna agrees to talk. She selects "tribal values" as her subject. Instead of showing an individualistic identity, Belladonna shows her Indianness as a socially constructed constituent (from both modern Western and tribal perspectives) that is dependent on social, cultural and political forces and on static views of seeing and thinking:

'tribal values is the subject of my talk!' She said in a loud voice.... 'we are raised with values that shape our world in a different light ...we are tribal and that means that we are children of dreams and visions ...' (*Bearheart* 194)

When asked to define her native values and her understanding of the essence of Indianness, a task that *Bearheart* as a text endeavors to do, Belladonna engages a tribal understanding. Specifically, in answering the crucial questions of "what does Indian mean?" and "what is Indian bloods?" Belladonna is trapped in her "terminal creeds."

Belladonna's favorite abstract subject, tribal values and national "dreams" show the strength of her "herd instinct" which is sharply contrasted to the skeptical way of thinking of the hunters and breeders (*Bearheart* 194) and other trickster figures. The hunters and breeders believe that "sharing conversations too close to agreement causes what we call internal violence" (*ibid* 192). *Bearheart* shows how "Questions" and "verbal doubts" are tools to be saved from "the internal violence." On the other hand, when there is no place inside to disagree with ideas and be suspicious about meaning... people are considered

dead with the unquestioned church in them (ibid 192). This is justified on the basis that the church kills people's intuitions with terminal creeds... (ibid192). As for Belladonna, her concept of life is based on religion, tribal past, dreams, and the fixity in her understanding of what Indianness is. In holding the claim that Indianness can only be terminal, Vizenor's attack on Belladonna's conception of a native culture and a national identity has been an attack on essentialism. According to Jesusby Benito (2009) "she defines Indianness as a stable, motionless static signifier, therefore denying the possibilities of change and adaptability" (100) that an Indian text seeks to achieve.

Belladonna's death is caused by her conception of terminal creeds and her "unquestioning assumptions" of the essentialist views on and about her Indian identity. The "tribal creeds" designate the need for what Vizenor calls "word wars," or the struggle to free oneself from the entrapment of the well-established structures, "the structurality of structure" of the Western modern civilization and its constitutionalized politics and fixed ideology. More clearly, Vizenor argues that "terminal creeds" characterize a closed and limited view, static ideas theories and approaches with which the modern culture has been enclosed, tied with or bounded in for so long. It is unique how Vizenor employs a postmodern technique, style and setting to attack extra and embedded hierarchical levels of terminal creeds. In this context a hierarchy has become an oral organizational model of inter-level relationships that reflects the role of the human imagination among Native Indian American oral cultures. Postmodernism and oral hierarchical models are combined to produce complicated postmodernized oral discourse of writing which is essential when hearing Vizenor's *Bearheart* and its depiction of new visious of truth and reality.

Conclusion

The modern history shows how Native American cultures undergo their own cultural and political "movements of transformation" as some Native American writers have started to recover their cultural and literary traditions in order to establish or reinstate an indigenous identity. Gerald Vizenor's work proves necessary in embracing and developing a native Indian indigenous voice that arises from within the hegemonic Western discourses of art and knowledge. However, Gerald Vizenor's masterpiece shows how the act of reinvigorating the indigenous Indian culture is clearly afflicted by the hegemonic Western cultural, literary and political contexts and ideologies.

In its will to trace the American Native literature - as situated within a postmodern culture, *Bearheart* throws light on the connection between the American Native literature and Western knowledge. To deconstruct the stability and "structurality" of the idea of "Indianness," Vizenor uses strategies that derive

not only from magical realism and the trickster discourse of writing, but also from Western techniques and strategies, both of which derive from a rising Western postmodern thought. It is through the recourse to a postmodernist structure that employs an oral tradition and a magical/mythical element, that Vizenor achieves "the necessary upsetting" envisioned for his oral postmodern text (Teuton 2008,103).

However, Vizenor's postmodern presentation in *Bearheart* suggests that the cultural ambiguousness and playfulness of tribal values and creeds constitutes a social paradigm that is not less rigid than the modern or post modern "terminal creeds" of the hegemonic Western civilization. In destabilizing the claim that identity can only be determined according to terminal creeds, Vizenor's attitude toward his native culture and identity comes from within a Western postmodern conceptuality. He proves himself to be ambivalently deriving from Western theories reliant on essentialist views and critical theories that are structured around fixed dichotomies. Such a presentation shows how the verisimilar accounts of the structuralist theories representing a fixing and limiting force or center has been acting forcefully on the dynamic flow of the oral/postmodern narrative: its storyline, plot, theme and characterization. To a great extent, *Bearheart* shows how Vizenor is trapped in the Western paradigm.

الكتابة عن التراث الشفهي:

معضلة تمثيل الذات في أدب السكان الأصليين في أمريكا: قراءة ما بعد- حدائبة لرواية جيرالد فيزنور فيرهارت "حكاوي الميراث"

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ملخص

شكلت رواية جيرالد فيزنور فيرهارت "حكاوي الميراث"، والتي تقدم أسطورة من أساطير السكان الأصليين في أمريكا تمتزج بعالم الخيال ما بعد الحدائي، معضلة للقراء الساعيين لتأطير هذه الرواية ضمن أنموذج النقد والأدب الغربي. فمادة فيرهارت ما بعد الحدائية تكسر حدود المؤلف المعاصر في النظرية، والأدب، والتاريخ. فرغم أن القصة تسرد إرثاً شفهيًا، إلا أن فيرهارت نجحت في إثارة خلخلة للكثير من مفاهيم الحقيقة، والهوية، واللغة، والسلطة الثقافية والأدبية، وذلك من خلال تلاعبها بالمفردات واستخدامها للتناص، وبناءها عقدة وشخصاً تعوزهما البنية المرتبة الواضحة. ويعد هذا النهج مناقضاً ليس لبنية النص الأدبي الغربي فحسب، بل مناقضاً "للخصوصية الثقافية" لقيم بعض القبائل الهندية والتي تؤسس ما يسميه فيزنور "الأعراف القبلية". لذا يعدّ تقديم فيزنور هذا مركباً إلى حد بعيد كونه يخلخل بنية "الأعراف النظرية القبلية" على مستويات عدة. فلقد تركت هذه الأعراف القبلية سواءً كانت أدبية أم غير أدبية، دينية أم علمانية، شفوية أم مدونة، قبلية أو غير قبلية، أثراً كبيراً على التاريخ، والأيدلوجيا، والثقافة الحديثة وما بعد الحديثة.

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