On Subjectivity and Survivance: Re-reading Trauma through The Heirs of Columbus and The Crown of Columbus

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"... we measure who we are from what we have done to the Indians"
Gerald Vizenor, *Landfill Meditation*

"Survivance stories honor the humor and tragic wisdom of the situation, not the market value of victimry... . Stories of survivance are a sure sense of presence... . Most of my stories are about survivance. No matter the miseries, most of the characters in my stories take on the world with wit, wisdom, and tricky poses. My stories are not the tragic mode, not the themes of heroic ruin, destruction, and moral weakness. My storiers are tricky not tragic, ironic not heroic, and not the comfy representations of dominance"
Gerald Vizenor, *Postindian Conversations*

In this essay, I take as my starting point dominant Western theories of trauma that deploy paradigms of trauma therapy that are based on the "recovery" of a singular and homogenous subjectivity. The cultural bias of this assumption, that reassimilation or reintegration of a fragmented ego must necessarily be the object of therapy, becomes clear in the context of Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance, which places productively in question the stability and desirability of this notion of selfhood in a Native American Indian context. The Western understanding of trauma emerges as a narrative of dominance, but it is revealed as such only when we substitute the term "survival" of trauma with that of "survivance" in the face of historical trauma. In what follows, I want to ask how does a "postindian" subject, such as Gerald Vizenor describes, survive? Is "recovery" from historical trauma either desirable or possible? And how is Native subjectivity situated in relation to the dominant American multiculture, within the context of post-contact historical trauma? My texts for this investigation are two prominent but very different Anishinaabe, Chippewa or Ojibwe novels written in anticipation of the Columbian quincentenary: Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991) and *The Crown of Columbus* (1991) by Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris. The latter offers us a survivor narrative; in contrast, Vizenor's novel offers a narrative of survivance.

Trauma in the Ruins of Representation

The implicit assumption in my title is that texts by Native American writers such as Gerald Vizenor and Louise Erdrich are "trauma narratives": that is, that these writers engage, whether deliberately or not, in the representation of historical trauma as a consequence of their status as self-identified Native American Indian, tribal, Anishinaabe writers. The fact that they have each written a significant text addressing the Columbian quincentenary, the anniversary of the beginning of the European invasion of the New World, is assumed similarly to address the

trauma consequent upon that invasion for Native people. These assumptions raise the highly problematic and contested questions of what constitutes trauma, who defines it, how it is represented in literary texts (and indeed in language itself), and what interests are served by contemporary definitions of literary trauma.

The Jungian clinician Emmett Early, for instance, argues that trauma is recognized as a contemporary problem because, unlike conditions in the past, it is only in the present that trauma is sufficiently uncommon to be seen as something outside the norm. Indeed, it is only in the current, fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* that the definition of trauma as an overwhelming experience outside the realm of normal human experience has been revised. However, theorists like the feminist clinician Laura Brown point out that the definition of trauma as belonging to a specific pathology that is defined within the context of patriarchal culture serves to hide the traumatizing conditions experienced as everyday life by members of oppressed groups: the poor, women, marginalized ethnic groups including Native Americans. She argues:

> To admit that these everyday assaults on integrity and personal safety are sources of psychic trauma, to acknowledge the absence of safety in the daily lives of women and other nondominant groups, admits to what is deeply wrong in many sacred social institutions and challenges the benign mask behind which everyday oppression operates (quoted in Tal, 1996).

This acknowledgement, that trauma itself is subject to appropriation by dominant discourses that serve interests other than those whose lives are most at risk, is a troubling realization but one that cuts to the heart of the problematics of trauma in a Native context.

To see Native Americans as a group that is, by definition, traumatized is to acknowledge the inadequacies and partialities of current definitions of trauma that emphasize the experience or witnessing of, or confrontation with, an event that is sudden and unexpected, which provokes a response of intense fear, helplessness or horror. An understanding of trauma such as this fails to account both for the inherited nature of certain forms of historical trauma and equally for the traumatic nature of everyday life for vulnerable people who daily confront with fear and helplessness the absence of safety or security in their lives. Reading Native American texts as trauma narratives can help us to read back against the grain of contemporary trauma theory to an enriched understanding of how the discourses of trauma operate in our contemporary multicultural or intercultural society.

The degree of trauma suffered by Native American tribal communities in the wake of Columbus cannot be overestimated. As Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence W. Gross points out, in his essay "The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion," a number of distinguishing features of the historical trauma experienced by Native American peoples must be recognized:

> First, the stress is society-wide in nature. The stress does not simply involve a small segment of the population, as might be the case with combat veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. Instead, everyone in the culture is affected to one degree or another. Second, the stress strikes at both the personal and institutional levels. As such, some features are expressed in the lives of individual people. However, an apocalypse causes the collapse of societal institutions, which normally function to circumvent and/or minimize stress in the wake of a shock to the culture and assist in the recovery process (2002 p. 450).

He goes on to argue that "an understanding of the comic vision can help explain how Anishinaabe culture is recovering in the wake of what I call 'Post Apocalypse Stress Syndrome.' Along with many other Native American peoples, the Anishinaabe have seen the end of our world, which has created tremendous social stresses. The comic vision of the Anishinaabe is helping us overcome that trauma and helps explain how we are managing to survive" (p. 437). Gross goes on to show how the comic vision of Gerald Vizenor and Louise Erdrich, like that of other contemporary Anishinaabe writers, contributes to the survival of the community by bringing the Old World into the New, by playing with cultural traditions old and new, within the context of trickster narratives. I will discuss the work of Vizenor and Erdrich below, but first I want to outline what I see as the urgent necessity of reading contemporary trauma theory through the lens of Native American literature and culture.

The emergent mainstream of trauma theory is dominated by the work of theorists like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Ruth Leys: theorists whose thought is broadly shaped by psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories of language and subjectivity. The work of these writers emphasizes the unknowability of trauma except in language, which is always shifting, deferring, and multiplying meaning. I have written elsewhere about the incommensurability of the notion of experience assumed by Cathy Caruth but refused by Native writers such as Paula Gunn Allen (Madsen 2007); here I want to suggest that the notion of trauma as fundamentally unknowable serves the interests of what Gerald Vizenor calls the "cultures of dominance." At the same time, this conceptualization identifies the fragmented and multiple subjectivity with trauma by implicitly positing the "healed" or "surviving" or "post-traumatic" self as unified, self-identical, coherent, and singular. Normality is identitified (though never explicitly) with a unified, reintegrated, or "whole" sense of self because the dis-unified, fractured self is what signifies the unknowable fact of trauma. In a Native context, the therapeutic aim of restoring the patient to a condition of cultural productivity similarly serves the interests of assimilation; if we ask "whose cultural productivity?" is to be restored then the imperative to assimilate socially is clearly conflated with the concept of psychic integration or assimilation. I want to question the assumption that healing necessarily means the transition to a condition of psychic assimilation or wholeness by reading against this understanding of trauma the fictional deployment of the Anishinaabe tribal trickster figure. Kali Tal is uncompromisingly clear in her assessment of the brand of trauma theory that refuses this style of reassessment:

> To be an American critic and to turn one's eyes to Europe, to the Holocaust for an example of a traumatized population *while at the same time* steadfastly refusing to look at any aspect of the African American experience (or, for that matter, the experience of Native Americans) is to perpetuate the racist and Eurocentric structures that were responsible for the traumatization of those populations in the first place (emphasis in original, 1996).

Jonathan Boyarin makes a similar point in his comparison between the situation of European Jews and American Native people: each is eulogized from afar in order to displace anxieties about traumatic histories that are too close to home (Boyarin 1992). It is urgent then that Western theory not only learn from tribal discourses but also that Western theorists learn to resist the discourses of dominance by listening to Native engagements with the historical experience of trauma.

The assumption that healing is equated to the reintegration of pyschic trauma through therapy – that the aim of therapy is assimilation – derives, in the work of influential scholars like Dominic LaCapra, from the Freudian legacy. LaCapra's widely cited essay "Trauma,

Absence, Loss" (1999) emphasizes the processes of "acting out" and "working through." Freud describes these concepts in seminal texts such as "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" (1914) and "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917). In the later essay, Freud distinguishes the "normal" process of mourning, which integrates loss, from the pathological condition of melancholia. The latter involves the loss of ego which, unlike mourning, cannot simply be overcome after a lapse of time. Melancholia involves compulsive repetition of an absent because traumatic past moment, possession by this traumatic past, and a narcississtic identification with the lost object. The melancholic subject is split in multiple directions between the past and present, caught in nostalgic longing and trapped in denial. In contrast to melancholia, according to LaCapra: "mourning brings the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life that allows one to begin again" (1999, p. 713).

Mourning is not a passive process of forgetting; rather, mourning is an active process of engaging and accepting the fact of loss. Michael Hardin, in his essay on Gerald Vizenor's novel *The Heirs of Columbus*, addresses this issue of forgetting:

> For a Native American to forget the wars the United States government fought against his/her ancestors, to forget the countless times they were forced from their homelands and massacred, to forget the European diseases which killed more than the weaponry, or to forget the other devastations on the native populations resulting from Western colonization, would serve to free the individual from the burden of a victimizing past, but it would also free the victimizer from responsibility (1998, pp. 26-7).

Forgetting is not an option; in Freudian terms, even the attempt simply to forget involves repression, melancholia, and the regressive cycle of "acting out" the symptoms of trauma. The repressed will always return. However, mourning itself is a complex and ambivalent condition in the Native American context. In the "literatures of dominance" mourning of a "lost" tribal world takes the form of the myth of the Vanishing American and other cultural narratives that Vizenor, in *Interior Landscapes* and elsewhere, so accurately names "terminal creeds" (1990, p. 235). Mourning, with its acceptance and integration of the lack of that which can never be retrieved, is an appropriate response, as Hartwig Isernhagen acutely observes, only "once improvement appears impossible" (2003, p. 281). That is, when loss is accepted as an irretrievable loss, rather than as a potentially recuperable absence, then mourning and the reintegration of the ego can take place. The acceptance of loss, an acknowledgement that things cannot get better, like the assimilation of the self to the "culture of dominance," is clearly an undesirable location for the Native American subject. To write *out* of mourning, however, to write *against* mourning and the assimilated self, is a strategy that resists the passive position of the victim, and the hopeless victim at that.

It is here that Vizenor's concept of survivance offers a vital alternative. In *Fugitive Poses* (1998) he writes:

> [S]urvivance, in the sense of native survivance, is more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence... . The native stories of survivance are successive and natural estates; survivance is an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry (1998, p. 15).

Survivance is not passive survival but an active resistance as well; it is the refusal of the "manifest manners" of dominance, the insistence upon Native people as "Vanished," or as

tragic victims, or as ig/noble savages frozen in a mythical past, or even as eco-warriors in an idealized New Age future. Vizenor observes that the fact that "postindians renounce the inventions and final vocabularies of manifest manners is the advance of survivance hermeneutics" (1994, p. 167). "Survivance hermeneutics" allow us to read back against dominant theories of historical trauma, to read trauma in the "ruins of representation" that are the remnants left once the imposed fictions of "Indianness" are stripped away from the dominant simulation of "*indian*" presence. Vizenor's postindian tricksters possess the power, among other things, to disrupt the flow of dominance in both space and time, as is amply demonstrated in *The Heirs of Columbus* with such reversals of causality as Columbus's return home to, rather than discovery of, the New World. This is important in the context of trauma theory because Freud's theory of acting-out, like Caruth's theory of trauma's "belated temporality" (Caruth 1991), presumes a linear relationship between past and present that permits the possibility of entrapment in a traumatic past. Postindian tricksters deconstruct the very opposition between past and present, defying linear thinking, just as they refuse the opposition between victim and aggressor.

Underlining this healing deconstructive power, in an interview with Laura Coltelli Vizenor explains:

> My storytellers, my characters have the power to heal through a good story, through the ecstatic concentration of energy and with a special genetic signature which is a shamanic power: they can heal and transform the wounded of this civilization. I have turned around the Columbus story to serve healing rather than victimization; there is much to be gained politically from victimization, but there is more to be gained from the power of a good story that heals, and I think my story heals the victims in a poetic and imaginative way (Coltelli 1990-91, p. 103).

By refusing the status of the victim, one who mourns an unrecuperable loss, while at the same time refusing to reintegrate loss into a unified and "whole" subjectivity, Vizenor's ironic, trickster storytellers embrace a positive multiplicity of being, a subjective diversity that counters the manifest manners of Western theories of trauma that would otherwise impose upon Native people fugitive poses, the masks of "*indian*" psychic health, a pretence of self-coherence that serves the fantasies of dominance rather than the practices of survivance.

Throughout his writings, Gerald Vizenor describes the trickster as a force who heals and balances the world. The trickster does not unify, does not resolve and remove contradiction, fragmentation or multiplicities. He holds them in balance. In the introduction to *Narrative Chance* (1989), Vizenor writes: "Monologic realism and representation in tribal literatures ... is a 'bureaucratic solution' to neocolonialism and the consumption of narratives and cultures" (1989, p. 6). The transformation of symptoms into monological therapies is the objective of conventional Freudian approaches to trauma. However, as I indicated above, such a transformation in Native American terms can easily become the adoption of images of what Vizenor calls, deliberately in lower-case italics, the *indian*: images that cater to the needs of traumatizing dominant discourses. Of course, the pathology and suffering that arise from a profound sense of dislocation, a "between worlds" condition, of alienation from two distinct cultures, is also symptomatic of the trauma described by contemporary theorists. How to embrace subjective diversity without succumbing to alienation is the challenge faced by Native peoples.

The figure of the "postindian" represents resistance and survival, Native survivance beyond tragedy, victimry, and simulations of the "*indian*" that can represent false "healing" in the culture of dominance. The postindian at once exposes the hermeneutic lack or absence that

is constitutive of stereotypical constructions of the *indian* but at the same time inscribes a trace of what it is that is absent:

> Native American Indians are the originary storiers of this continent, and their stories of creation, sense of imagic presence, visionary memories, and tricky survivance are the eternal traces of native modernity. ... Native stories are an imagic presence, the actual tease of human contingencies, but indians are immovable simulations, the tragic archives of dominance and victimry. Manifest manners favor the simulations of the indian traditionalist, an ironic primitive with no cultural antecedence (Vizenor 1994)

This trace, or excess of meaning that exceeds the absence that is the *indian*, is revealed in what Vizenor calls, in the essay "Shadow Survivance," in *Manifest Manners* (1994), the "postindian turns in literature." In the absence of the singular "*indian*" and with the consequent "closure of dominance," the traces or shadows of tribal survivance appear, along with the potential for a different kind of healing. "The traces are shadows, shadows, shadows, memories, and visions in heard stories" (1994 p. 63). The repetition of the word "shadow" indicates the multiple and diverse nature of these traces that exist outside the constraints of narratives of dominance. Shadows image the hermeneutic excess, the multiple significances, of language understood as a performative utterance. Language does not passively represent or mirror but acts to organize our knowledge of ourselves and our world in ways that can be variously traumatizing or healing. "We are shadows, silence, stones, stories, never the simulation of light in the distance" (p. 64). This understanding is participatory, multiple and never fixed. Shadow traces are subject to Derridean *différance*, as Vizenor makes explicit: always different, always deferred, always-already in creative transformation. Amost Browne, the eponymous trickster hero of the story that opens *Landfill Meditations* (1991), learns from his grandmother to read the living "crossblood" words that are everywhere: "in snow, trees, leaves, wind, birds, beaver, the sound of ice cracking; words are in fish and mongrels ... . My winter breath is a word, we are words, real words, and the mongrels are their own words" (p. 8). "Shadow traces" in these living words facilitate survivance as a way of exceeding the confines or boundaries of language, especially when language is articulated by the "dead voices" of social science, anthopology or history.

Vizenor writes against the traumatizing, monolithic "terminal creeds" perpetuated in social science discourses; these destructive stereotypes of Native American people are embedded in the institutional understandings of "Indianness" that Ishi, the "museum Indian," iconizes in Vizenor's writings. These monologic Western epistemologies perpetuate trauma and it is these that Vizenor sets out to subvert with irony, wicked humor, and a language that refuses to render monologic meanings. As Elvira Pulitano observes: "Vizenor's style is not linear, progressive; it does not follow the logic of cause and effect. Rather, it embraces chance, celebrates play, relishes ambiguity, breaks rules, confounds expectations, invites involvement" (2002, p. 164). Language is used creatively to engage the reader; the trickster liberates the subject to self-knowledge but that subjectivity is not singular and monolithic. The self is always multiple and subject to liberating transformation because closure is always-already subject to *différance*: hermeneutic distinctions and deferrals of meaning. Such closure as we know is found in terminal creeds: in "the terminal vernacular of manifest manners, and the final vocabularies of dominance" (1994 p. 68). Vizenor says, in an interview with Kimberley Blaeser, his writing is many things but "it's not a monologue" (p. 162): it is a dialogue in which the reader is compelled to take an actively creative role. This emphasis upon the plural, on existence and identity in the plural, appears in *Dead Voices* (the novel published in 1992, the actual year of the Columbian quincentenary), in the chapter "Bears,"

which includes a lengthy meditation on the significance of stories that have been lost by "wordies" or Europeans, who are left only with the desire of tribal stories:

> We never had any trouble remembering to use plural pronouns, but most wordies could not understand who we were talking about. They saw the old woman but not the bear. We are one and the same. There's a trickster in the use of words that includes the natural world, a world according to the we, and the we is our metaphor in the wanaki game (p. 39).

Monologic discourses are addressed by "I" but, as Vizenor wrote in the 1989 essay "Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games," "The author, narrator, characters and audience are the signifiers and comic holotropes in trickster narratives" (p. 188). "We" are all in this together, in Vizenor's *dia*logic or even *multi*logic style of writing.

In the essay "Eternal Haven," in *Manifest Manners*, Columbus is accused of imposing pronouns on Native people and, in so doing, creating the first simulated *indians*: "[h]e is the deverbative trickster, the one who landed in two pronouns, the he and you" (p. 107). In this way Columbus excludes Native people from the category of "we" and relegates them to absence, just as Vizenor does in return to Columbus when he addresses him combatively as "You" (see pp. 107-8). Columbus is the false trickster, trapped in the static Manichean oppositions of the dominant discourse. As Vizenor writes in *Fugitive Poses*,

> The sovereignty of motion is mythic, material, and visionary not mere territoriality, in the sense of colonialism and nationalism. Native transmotion is an original natural union in the stories of emergence and migration that relate humans to an environment and to the spiritual and political significance of animals and other creations. Monotheism is dominance over nature; transmotion is natural reason, and native creation with other creatures (p. 183).

In *The Heirs of Columbus* Vizenor transforms Columbus's transatlantic territorial "motion" into native "transmotion," as Columbus is called across the seas by a New World shaman. Vizenor's crossblood transformations, in story after story, book after book, offer imaginative affirmations of a diverse selfhood. The multiple personality of the semiotic trickster figure is described in *Landfill Meditations* as "a character in stories, an animal, or person, even a tree at times, who pretends the world can be stopped with words, and he frees the world in stories" (p. 24).

The necessity of rereading Western understandings of trauma from this perspective of survivance is emphasized by mental health professionals, such as Eduardo Duran who, in two important books, underlines the fact that Western therapies simply do not work in a Native American Indian context. Suicide rates among Native American people remain higher than among non-Natives, as do rates of such disorders as alcoholism, schizophrenia, psychoses, neuroses, personality disorders, drug dependence; Duran comments, with ironic understatement: "evidence indicates that Native Americans may not be receiving responsive mental health services, and ... past and present mental health services for Native Americans are inadequate" (1984 p. 2). Orthodox therapies and views of both illness and healing must be revised, Duran argues, from the perspective of "traditional" or indigenous therapeutic practices. Though Duran seeks ultimately to "harmonize" what he calls orthodox and traditional therapies, the hybrid and polyvalent strategies that he proposes as steps towards this assimilation are reminiscent of the revaluation of multiplicity or diversity that I see as the most fundamentally valuable aspect of survivance for rereading Western concepts of trauma. I

don't want to suggest that fragmentation or alienation are beneficial conditions for anyone; however, multiple discourses and identities, held in creative balance, offer a way of avoiding the dangers of subjective assimilation to "terminal creeds."

In the section that follows, I want to explore the potential for the revision of understandings of historical trauma through two very different literary approaches: Vizenor's narrative of survivance, *The Heirs of Columbus*, and the survival narrative, *The Crown of Columbus* by Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris.

Two Anishinaabe Columbiads

Above, I quoted Vizenor's comment in *Manifest Manners* that "We are shadows, silence, stones, stories, never the simulation of light in the distance" (p. 64). This simulation of light is the opposite to tribal shadows but at the same time offers the possibility for imagining both that which is feared and also that which is desired. The story "Feral Lasers," in *Landfill Meditations*, demonstrates the power of holograms to create the images of colonizers that terrify tribal people on the reservation and also images of wild animals stampeding the interstate that terrify Anglo-Americans. In contrast to these images of fear, in *The Heirs of Columbus*, the laser show in which Almost Browne recreates the Admiral is accompanied by the broadcast of a favorable court decision on tribal sovereignty to which the narrator adds:

> "The notion of sovereignty is not tied to the earth, sovereignty is neither fence nor feathers," the loudspeakers boomed over the headwaters that night. "The very essence of sovereignty is a communal laser. The *Santa Maria* and the two caravels are luminous sovereign states in the night sky, the first maritime reservation on a laser anchor" (p. 62).

The communal laser creates an image of Columbus to add to his gallery of figures: Jesus Christ, Joan of Arc, Crazy Horse, and the Statue of Liberty: all figures of communal fictions. Indeed, the laser images projected on to the sky echo the holotropic status Vizenor attributes to the tribal trickster himself: "a comic holotrope, the whole figuration; an unbroken interior landscape that beams various points of view in temporal reveries" (quoted in Owens, 1992, p. 251). Like the trickster figure, sovereignty is an effect of language, a rhetorical creation that is no less real for that. Indeed, in the legal dispute between the heirs of Columbus and the Brotherhood of American Explorers, the judge sets aside the "common rules of evidence" in favor of imagination and concedes that "the laser shows and wild presentation of virtual realities ... as the new sources of tribal realities, could be used to appeal a conviction" (p. 65). And Binn Columbus demonstrates her power of imagination, after the judge has stored a secret memory in a box, by recreating from laser-like blue radiance the panther that the judge remembered. The laser show at the end of the novel, as Stone Columbus engages the *wiindigoo* in the moccasin game, returns "home" seven key figures (Jesus Christ, Columbus, Crazy Horse, Black Elk, Louis Riel, Filipa Flowers and Pocahontas) to the statue of the Trickster of Liberty, in signification of the balance but not resolution of good and evil that ends the narrative.

This idea of return is central to *The Heirs of Columbus*, where Vizenor transforms the Admiral into a crossblood Indian, a descendant of Mayans, and the "discovery" thus becomes a homecoming. This is a subversive rewriting of the legacy of Columbus. Iping Liang argues, in her essay on "opposition play" in the novel, "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" (2003, p. 124). However, I think it is debatable whether the Admiral is indeed a healing trickster. In his sexual liaison with Samana he does undergo transformation, "to become a woman, a bear, a hand talker" (p. 40), while she becomes androgynous. But the consequence of this liaison, besides establishing the lineage of Columbus, is for him alienation from himself. He, and not Samana, is traumatized by this encounter, as the next day he watches himself sail away: "his bones were lost on a mission, his soul was scorned and abandoned with the histories of the Old World" (p. 40). So Columbus is rewritten in this novel as the victim of a traumatic history. As Michael Hardin comments:

> 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 Columbus a good story and I don't consider it healthy after such a long time to continually tell a bad story that victimizes me" ("Gerald Vizenor: The Trickster Heir of Columbus: An Interview" 102). Vizenor is playing the trickster here: in *Heirs of Columbus*, he makes Columbus a "good story" by rewriting it, by making it about someone other than Christopher Columbus (1998 p. 26).

Thus, in Vizenor's storied transformation, the trauma of contact becomes a story of survivance, of changing the world, rather than a story of conquest and of possessing the world. In *Postindian Conversations* (1999) he tells A. Robert Lee: "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. ... Columbus was a crossblood, a descendant of the ancient natives, and he was teased by this inheritance to return to his ancestral homeland" (pp. 128-29). This homeland is represented as the tribal New World of the Stone Nation. In this place there are no passports to reify identity into a singular concept; it emerges that Stone himself is not an enrolled tribal member because his father refused "the political reductions of identities" (p. 156). In this tribal New World diversity of identity, of subjectivity, is encouraged.

The Heirs of Columbus can be read within a trilogy of "heirship" texts – with *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1978, 1990) and *The Trickster of Liberty: Tribal Heirs to a Wild Baronage* (1988) – as Iping Liang does, to good effect, in her essay "Opposition Play: Trans-Atlantic Trickstering in Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*." She explains:

> 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 (2003, p. 133).

In this novel, Columbus not only comes home, he comes together in the New World, as he is physically reassembled by tribal shamans. This is a key "acting-out" for Columbus, a healing-through-reintegration that happens only through tribal mediation. The narrative offers other instances of acting-out earlier historical trauma, as when Felipa travels to London to attend a masque that repeats the celebration held in honor of Pocahontas, exactly 400 years before, a

masquerade that is mockingly repeated later by Caliban the mongrel who acts as a waiter to entertain tribal children in "brocaded velvet and a wide elaborate lace collar, and pretended to be Pocahontas in London" (p. 145). Or Stone's establishment of the new sovereign nation, which is a repetition of Columbus's voyage, the "Santa Maria Ferry was the flagship of the tribal armada; two ferries and seven barges were close behind in Puget Sound" (p. 122), displaying the significance of this voyage: "Columbus Takes Back the New World at Point Roberts" (p. 123). These instances of acting-out do not bring about therapeutic healing or the assimilation of trauma into a stable subjectivity. Felipa is killed the day following the masque; Stone moves in the direction of healing by establishing the new sovereign tribal nation but it is a complex healing strategy that he pursues.

As Helen Jaskoski notes in her review of the novel:

> A look at the philosophy embodied in works like *The Heirs of Columbus* shows it to be above all provisional in nature. "Terminal creeds" receive Vizenor's scorn in many of his works, and conversely the Trickster, whose being is ever provisional, contingent, and metamorphic, engages and fascinates him. But accepting provisionality as principle is a contradiction: to say "there are no absolutes" is to affirm an absolute, while to suggest a provisional formulation ("maybe there are some absolutes?") moves toward inanity. This contradiction vibrates at the heart of *The Heirs of Columbus* (and other works), and accounts, I think, for its self-reflexive, self-conscious self-subversion: no position can be at the center of the discourse, no character – not excluding the supposedly omniscient narrative voice – can have more than momentary, provisional credibility (p. 82).

In this novel the very idea of identity is provisional and contingent. Columbus created the *indian* as a European simulation born of the "culture of death." As Vizenor writes in *Fugitive Poses*: "The *indian* has no native ancestors; the original crease of that simulation is Columbian" (p. 15). Michael Hardin elaborates: "Stone Columbus wants to eradicate the very idea of racial identity in Assinika; the constructs of identity are no longer to exist. The healing, tribal stories are the important thing: stories of Columbus and Pocahontas, wiindigoo and the blue moccasins" (p. 43). The deconstruction of singular understandings of identity is contextualized by the opposition between "terminal blood quantum creeds" (p. 132) and the genetic signature of survivance that the heirs have taken from Columbus. The narrative emphasizes both the talismanic animal identities possessed by each of the heirs and the genetic "stories in the blood" that heal. Both visible disguises and invisible identities are represented, like the shamanic shadow in 3-dimensions that is captured on video by the Brotherhood of American Explorers and shown in court. The witness, Memphis de Panther, advises the judge: "The trouble with humans is they believe their disguises are real, but not imagination, or their dreams" (p. 72). Belief in only the visible, in a single visible identity, is a terminal creed promoted by the culture of dominance.

Throughout the novel, singularities are deconstructed in favor of the importance of balance, of keeping opposites in a creative tension and necessarily without resolution. The healing property of the survivance signature is described in these terms by the scientist Pir Cantrip: "These four letters are held together in a signature by their opposites, the biochemical codes are bound by their own opposition, and here is where the shaman and the trickster touch that primal source of humor, imagination, and the stories that heal right in the antinomies of the genetic code" (p. 134). The children who are the intended beneficiaries of this new genetic technology, the "lonesome mutants of a chemical civilization" (p. 134), will also be healed by bio-chemistry. But only shamans and tricksters have the power to "stimulate the trickster

opposition in the genes, the ecstatic instructions, and humor in the blood" (p. 144). The power of opposition is distinct from the negative influence of separation, as Stone explains: "We heal with opposition, we are held together with opposition, not separation, or silence, and the best humor in the world is pinched from opposition" (p. 176). Resolution is death; assimilation into singularity and the surrender of diversity is also death. Consequently, at the end, the novel offers no resolution beyond the return of all the wounded tribal people, living and dead, among them Columbus and Pocahontas to the New World of Assinika. The *wiindigoo* advises that the game never ends; the balance of opposed forces that brings tribal healing never ends but must always be renewed, and re-won.

The protagonist of *The Crown of Columbus*, Vivian Twostar, thinks of herself not in terms of diversity but of amalgamation into a singular identity, as one of "the lost tribe of mixed bloods, that hodgepodge amalgam of hue and cry that defies easy placement" (p. 123). This, she claims, gives her the freedom of self-creation; she has "a million stories, one for every occasion, and in a way they're all lies and in another way they're all true" (p. 123). In this respect, Vivian finds kinship with the Columbus she imagines, another "between cultures" person that she envisions speaking many languages but each with a foreign accent; only in the mid-Atlantic could he find the global perspective from which he could feel that he belonged. This kinship, this sympathy that bridges five hundred years of New World history underpins the narrative strategy of this novel and its interpretation of post-Columbian history.

The entry for Louise Erdrich in Gale's *Authors and Artists for Young Adults* includes the following comment on *The Crown of Columbus*:

> Ultimately acknowledging the destructive impact of Columbus's voyage on the Native American people, they [Vivian and Roger] each vow to redress the political wrongs symbolically by changing the power structure in their relationship. In the end, as Vivian and Roger rediscover themselves, they rediscover America (2003, n.p.).

What kind of "America" do they "rediscover"? It is not the "America-as-inheritance" that Vizenor's heirs of Columbus claim from the U.S. government. Even when Vivian tells herself that she wants Columbus's diary in order to prove his recognition of tribal sovereignty, to win back America for tribal people, she also acknowledges that she is motivated by the greed of discovery. This is a rather different motive to that which moved the native Dartmouth student who, centuries before, deliberately hid the pages of Columbus's diary that indicate the location of the precious crown. This action, he declares across time in the note included with the pages, is intended to take back that which was taken from him: his land, his life. The contrast between these two characters is significant, indicating as it does that while the narrative is prepared to acknowledge a counter-narrative to the dominant story of Columbus's discovery, the novel's major characters are engaged in a rather different set of issues.

In *The Crown of Columbus* Erdrich and Dorris endorse a fundamentally multicultural, or even what Stanley Fish calls a "boutique multiculturalist," position on American intercultural relations. The narrative appeals repeatedly to a notion of "common humanity" that underlies the superficial differences of ethnicity and this informs the novelistic representation of Columbus and his "discovery." Vivian tries to imagine a world in which Columbus had never existed and realizes: "If it hadn't been Christopher [sic] it would have been somebody else at about the same time – perhaps even somebody worse" (p. 23). The cosy familiarity of referring to Columbus as "Christopher" signals the proximity that Vivian projects between the two of them. She concedes that Columbus was a slave-trader but that is balanced against the slave-trading of the Cobb family, an ancestor of whom traded slaves in part for the original of Columbus's diary: the object of her quest. Her son, Nash, confesses

that he wants to help resolve the mystery of Columbus's treasure in order to make "a connection to the past" (p. 160); this is precisely what this novel tries to do: to make a connection to the past by revealing the "common humanity" that links Columbus with present-day Native Americans like Vivian and her son. When Vivian tries to trick Cobb by confessing to an invented need to validate her knowledge of Columbus by reading his original diary, she recognizes, as she says, that "the language I used was that of another time, another place. It was the vocabulary of the colonizer. Discovery. Possession. How different *was* I from the construct I fabricated?" (p. 200). This commonality, or lack of difference between the European colonizer Columbus and the Native woman Vivian, is made possible by the multicultural nature of the contemporary world described through the character of Nash: "a small place, all parts connected, where an Indian using an ancient Asian art can break into an old European box, witnessed by someone who grew up in Australia" (p. 369). This transnational perspective serves to underline what is common among people of diverse times and places. What is emphasized is not the diversity, however, but the shared characteristics of human beings whether they are Indian, Asian, European, or Australian. In contrast to *The Heirs of Columbus*, which resists at every turn the concept of assimilation, of commonality, in favor of creatively balanced oppositions, *The Crown of Columbus* seeks the timeless and cultureless "human nature" of contemporary liberal thought.

The Crown of Columbus is, therefore, a novel about survival: not survivance. Vivian Twostar resists writing the story of 1492 told from the Native's perspective, which is what the editor of the Dartmouth alumni magazine wants her to write. And, in fact, this is the story that Michael Dorris has written in his novel for young adults, *Guests* (1994). But this counter-narrative is the story Vivian tells her students: the story of the decimation of Native communities by disease and the superior force of European armaments. She asks them to close their eyes and project themselves imaginatively into the past, to imagine living in a tribal community under European assault: "the well-tended faces looked sad, sorry for themselves" (p. 85). Vivian's son, Nash, similarly describes himself within the context of victimry as "an improbable exception, a survivor of survivors of survivors" (p. 364).

Where Vizenor plays with the idea of difference, but at the same time expresses a profound scepticism towards racial difference, Erdrich and Dorris articulate what is essentially a more pessimistic view of the differences that divide Native people from Anglo-Americans and Europeans. This is evident even in the most obvious aspects of the two novels. Where Vizenor brings Columbus back to the New World, to the Reservation, literally as bones but also in the flesh of his heirs, Erdrich and Dorris take their protagonists to the island scene of Columbus's landing in order to reenact the "discovery" which, in their narrative, really is represented as a "discovery," in contrast to Vizenor's trickier notion of "return."

The discovery of Columbus's crown is an obvious repetition of the discovery motif but the concept of repetition is a structuring principle of the narrative. As Roger boards the boat in Florida, bound for Eleuthera, he is conscious of repeating Columbus's voyage but in reverse; he is pleased by the thought of "the parallel ... to the Admiral's own voyage, though of course we debarked from the opposite shore" (p. 174). Once on the island it is Vivian who places them in the position of intruders, conquerors; like Columbus, each is seeking vindication: "We seemed suddenly like predators, parasites ... . We had come to Eleuthera to steal away some fantasy of our own. ... What did we have to do with the pulse of life in this place?" (p. 226). These repetitions even enter the novel's characterization: at one point Vivian imagines Roger as Columbus and herself as his mistress, Beatriz Peraza (p. 112), but in fact the plot of the novel plays more on the Pocahontas myth, with Roger Williams as the New England Captain who requires rescue by the enamored Indian princess. This is the Disney version of the Pocahontas story, to be sure, and at one point Vivian even jokingly wonders whether Cobb sees their arrival on the island as "Pocahontas and John Smith go to Hawaii" (p.

219).

Where the novel documents in painstaking detail the strategies by which Vivian and Roger negotiate the complexities of selfhood within their multicultural relationship, Vizenor's Columbiad engages in the complex process of deconstruction of the very categories of self versus other, so otherness becomes an opposed but inseparable part of the self. Commenting on Doctor Pir Cantrip's Dorado Genome Pavilion, Helen Jaskoski writes:

> When science addresses the genetic code, "survivance" is no longer a matter of inheritance, but of intellectual manipulation. There are no genes for "race," and the concept deconstructs as one more fiction available for pernicious misunderstanding (1992, p. 83).

By deconstructing the notion of race, of genetic racial specificity, Vizenor neither rejects nor endorses the allied idea of cultural identity, unlike Stone Columbus who "would accept anyone who wanted to be tribal, 'no blood attached or scratched'" (p. 162). Instead, the narrative holds in balance, on the one hand, the ideas of "stories in the blood," the inherited power of tribal identity that pulled the Admiral across the ocean and, on the other hand, the trickster desire of Stone to "make the world tribal, a universal identity, and return to other values as measures of human worth" (p. 162). What Arnold Krupat calls the "democratizing" of the metaphoric tribal signature (2000 p. 170) through the emphasis upon shared values permits Vizenor to deconstruct these terminal creeds and "'tragic' closures of birth and blood" (Krupat, 2000 p. 174). At Point Assinika, racial identity can be changed with genetic implants but healing requires the special power of shamans and tricksters.

In connection with blood identity and inheritance, both novels mention parthenogenesis: Vizenor refers to parthenogenesis as a strategy for separatist feminists with whom, like the abused children who flock to Point Assinika for healing, his narrator expresses sympathy. Parthenogenesis in Erdrich and Dorris's novel is, however, purely personal, the spiteful response of Roger Williams to his exclusion from Vivian's pregnancy. "Let Vivian present her baby to the world as a product of parthenogenesis, let her titillate the Women's Studies Program with her brave unmarried motherhood ..." (p. 50). He goes on to describe his work, his poetry, as a refuge not so much from his disappointment or hurt but from the denial of parenthood that parthenogenesis represents to him. And parenthood clearly signifies a child that will memorialize him: an heir. Memorialization, whether through a child or an epic poem, is what Roger Williams seeks and this is also what the novel itself achieves. What this narrative remembers, finally, is the way in which Columbus's contact with the peoples of the New World made Europe a smaller place, as the island girl Valerie discovers. After her contact with Vivian, for the first time in her life, she becomes aware of the sea: of the possibility of crossing it, just like Columbus did. Vivian, the Native woman, is here the agent of contact and breeder of discontent. *The Crown of Columbus* memorializes the Columbus in all of us and the "us," by implication, that motivated Columbus and all that followed in his name. Where Vizenor brings Columbus's bones into the present as a dead yet powerful presence in the contemporary world, Erdrich and Dorris take us back to 1492 to acknowledge that, in his time and place, we would have done just the same as Columbus did. This is why Roger, scion of generations of elite New England families, is able to complete Vivian's article on Columbus for the Dartmouth alumni magazine: the difference between him and a Native woman such as Vivian has been eroded by the relentless pressure of the narrative toward "common humanity." In this context, such superficial differences as gender, ethnicity, and class are purely incidental. Roger becomes Native just as we become Columbus in our timeless human essence.

Conclusion

Let me return to the questions with which I began: how does a "postindian" subject, such as Gerald Vizenor describes, survive? Is "recovery" from historical trauma either desirable or possible? And how is Native subjectivity situated in relation to the dominant American multiculture, within the context of post-contact historical trauma? Benjamin Burgess, in his 2006 essay on *The Heirs of Columbus*, focusses upon the traumatic impact of the historical narrative of Columbus's "discovery" and "conquest" of the Americas and the potential for healing possessed by some kinds of storytelling. Euroamerican culture, he argues, tells stories that make people sick; Anishinaabe culture, in contrast, tells stories to heal. He explains:

> Indigenous people, when confronted with the dominant narrative become sick with anger because their pain, the very real historical trauma, is ignored. Euroamericans that celebrate Columbus become sick with fear that their celebrations of civilization over savagery will be negated by Indigenous protests. In the film *Bimaadiziwin: A Healthy Way of Life*, Sonny Smart, a Bad River Ojibwe, explains the meaning of *aakozi*, the Ojibwe word for "he/she is sick." He says that an older man told him that the literal translation is "to be out of balance." He goes on to say that "one of the things that can create *aakozi* could be physical, could be spiritual, intellectual process too, [and] emotional." The last two causes are relevant to this discussion because the dominant narrative sets in motion an intellectual and emotional response (2006, p. 35, n.3).

This understanding of balance as a healthy response to historical trauma informs all of Vizenor's writing; in *The Heirs of Columbus* it is clear that the balance of opposites is the only therapeutic strategy that permits a "postindian" subject to survive. By collapsing opposites into a single collective, and reductive, category like "common humanity" a narrative such as *The Crown of Columbus* resolves opposition but at the risk of promoting *indian* identities. Recovery, in these terms, is no recovery at all. Vizenor offers us a literal recovery of Columbus by subverting the dominant narrative of his life and heritage but this involves neither forgetting nor memorialization, neither melancholia nor mourning, but a creative strategy of writing a route out of mourning through irony, subversion, and outrageous re-imaginings that are always provisional, always-already under erasure and in need of renewal.

What is offered as recovery in *The Crown of Columbus* is a more conventional working-through of loss, through patterns of repetition that lead ultimately to assimilation and reintegration into the contemporary American multiculture. Susan Farrell defends the novel against its hostile initial reviews by describing it as a postmodern narrative. She sees the celebration of multiculturalism as:

> ... a conscious strategy, one that not only reminds readers that Indians and contemporary Americans are not mutually exclusive groups but also presents an irreverent, trickster-like mixing of cultures as the key to the survival of Native Americans (p. ?).

Indeed, this "mixing of cultures," this multiculturalism functions, in the novel, as a form of cultural orthodoxy that has supplanted the melting pot and even the salad bowl, replacing them with a house of many nations, like the one Vivian and Roger build at the novel's end. This house, where each family member has a space in which to be different but remains defined by the encompassing space of the house, symbolizes the happy ending for these

protagonists and, by extension, the national family of New World Americans who can rest guiltless in the knowledge that some kind of justice has been achieved. But in this house there is no "mixing of cultures": Roger will eat the Navajo chili that Vivian serves him and Vivian will listen to the Bach that Roger favors but her Native grandmother will live in an add-on room where Roger does not have to listen to her. There is no healing balance in this house or in the story that created it; all opposition is subsumed into a "common humanity" that Roger, in the last named narration, endorses: "Human nature is no different now than it has ever been: the present is a sponge that sucks history dry" (p. 375). Not surprisingly, the final narrative segment, like the first, is narrated by an anonymous third-person voice; the novel is framed by the voice of "humanity."

This fictional validation of American multiculturalism and the "Columbus-in-us-all" might represent a comforting Native literary response to the Columbian quincentenary (according to Robert Silberman, worth $1.5 million as an advance to Erdrich and Dorris from a major U.S. media conglomerate) and certainly it is consonant with the dominant direction of contemporary trauma theory: with an emphasis upon the reintegration of the ego, through working-out strategies of historical repetition. However, in Native terms such reintegration risks acceptance of "terminal creeds" that depend upon such liberal solutions to historical injustice as multiculturalism and, Vivian Twostar's recourse, international legal bureaucracy. These strategies invite precisely the tragedy and victimry that Gerald Vizenor's work is devoted to negating. The American multiculture can, perhaps, promise survival but not survivance. Rereading against the direction of liberal multiculturalism and contemporary trauma theory, through the lens of texts like *The Heirs of Columbus*, the desirability of "recovery" as the move to a singular and homogenous subjectivity is profoundly put in question. The preservation of difference not sameness, of provisionality not stability, of balance not resolution and Freudian "wholeness", emerges as a desirable condition for Native people who must live every moment with the evidence of their traumatic history, with the everyday assaults on their integrity and personal safety, that are ongoing sources of psychic trauma. How to live *not* in sadness, "sorry for themselves" like Vivian Twostar's Dartmouth students; rather, how to live in a condition of resistance and survival, of Native survivance, beyond tragedy, victimry, and simulations of the "*indian*," apart from false healing in the culture of dominance, this is a lesson that can only be learned by rereading theory and literature through the lens of Native literatures of survivance.

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