

Writing on the Wall

Métis Reflections on Gerald Vizenor's Critical Strategies of Survival

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Cet essai porte sur l'impact de la colonisation sur une chercheure/activiste de la rivière Rouge qui enseigne à l'université. L'auteure s'inspire du travail de Gerald Vizenor, théoricien critique des Anishinaabe qui supporte et encourage ses activités académiques et communautaires. Elle scrute les problèmes qui surgissent dans les échanges épineux entre les communautés autochtones et les colonisateurs. Elle suggère des stratégies concrètes qu'elle a recueillies au cours d'une décennie d'activisme communautaire avec le Cercle des femmes Métis et comme professeure en Études autochtones.

Yesterday I walked across a small inner-city park. It was just a barren-looking patch of burnt grass, a space adjacent to a concrete subsidized high-rise building. A smaller concrete structure covered in graffiti stood in the center of the park. Some of the markings were tags and throw ups, contemporary versions of "I was here," but the one that caught my attention read, "This is Canada." Who had written this concise message? I read this phrase as a fleeting irony, a political voice. Schmo, an American graffiti writer, says "Graffiti writers are out challenging the issues of property ownership, race boundaries, and culture. They are out there making people think about what our society is, and what some of our laws really mean"

(qtd. in "The Merits of Art"). The graffiti that appeared a few weeks ago on the walls of the Zibi Anishnaabeg Community Centre¹ was of a more sinister intent, with its swastikas and "white power" slogans. In his analysis of forms of graffiti, Jeff Ferrel describes this specific style of graffiti as "the ugly edge of a culture organized around economic and ethnic inequality"⁽⁵⁾ Graffiti is also about interrupting invisibility. I was tempted for a moment to pull a marker out of my bag and write "This is Métis!" I refused the impulse, acknowledging my privilege to write and speak in the broader arena of print and classroom.

This essay seeks to illustrate ways in which oral tradition in contemporary forms underpins my scholar/activist work. Text, speaking on the page, is included in the process of gathering Aboriginal knowledges. Writers, Elders, knowledge-keepers, our elder brothers and sisters, and all living beings contribute resources that direct our actions in community collaborative work. Gerald Vizenor is among the many contemporary Indigenous writers who influence my thinking, and with his permission I have adopted his richly poetic term, "new urban earthdiver" (1981a: 6), to describe my activism. Vizenor is a mixed-blood Anishnaabe scholar who works out of the University of California, Berkeley.

His amazingly prolific lifelong effort has been to write in the trickster mode of Native American traditions, using humour and ironic images to challenge received ideas, subvert the status quo, and to teach strategies of survival in what he terms "the new Indian wars," those media-driven, intellectual, and verbal skirmishes he names the "cultural word wars" (1978: viii).

The Speaking Subject

In "Memory Alive: Race, Religion, and Métis Identities," I briefly describe my Métis history, the land which gave me my identity, and the people I was born for. This is a necessary and time-honoured Indigenous way of establishing my right to speak as an Aboriginal person. Since writing "Memory Alive," I have joined the faculty of Wilfrid Laurier University, contributed to the development of our Indigenous Studies Program, and most recently was granted tenure. One sentence does not convey the tensions and challenges this academic process has presented for me, yet I have not lost my sense of humour and my gratitude for the gifts given on this journey.

My roots stretch deep into Red River territory. My grandmother's people walked from Minnesota into Manitoba to create the tiny Métis village of Vassar, Manitoba, in the

early 1800s. My grandparent's people were from Brokenhead and St. Peters Reserves, Québec and Montana. They carried French names, and spoke Michif. They were living there on that land for many generations, building their villages along the lay of the land, using the ancient wintering camps of their tribal relatives and finding ways to live between the seams of tribal and encroaching Euro-Canadian cultures.

My grandparents were part of a generation of Métis whose lives and communities were deeply affected by the aftermath of failed uprisings, of failed resistances, in the face of sweeping loss of land, space, and the right to exist as communities. One of the many consequences of defeat at the Battle of Batoche was that the name Métis, already categorized in Euro-Canadian society by concepts of race and miscegenation, was made synonymous with crisis, rebellion, and disloyalty. My Métis parents were raised to suppress their Indigenous identities; their generation was "born into a historically scorned and jeopardized status" (Jordan 300). I think of Oka, Gustafsen Lake, Ipperwash, and the latest land reclamation efforts at Caledonia as contemporary events with similar consequences for Native peoples. For me, Métis is a verb, a being and becoming, not tied to only one historicized territory, but evident throughout what we now call Canada.

Like Vizenor, I come from a storytelling people. The stories I heard as a child were "liberative stories and strategies of survivance" (Vizenor 1993: 18). My uncle Joe worked on the railroad in Sioux Lookout and he would ride the trains to visit us. He loved to sit at the kitchen table and tell long, complicated, and richly detailed stories. His stories were about contemporary people and events in new urban settlements, told through a Métis consciousness of the past. Even in the inner cities, owls and wolves and bears inhabit our stories. The rhythms and themes

of Uncle Joe's stories echoed ancient Saulteaux stories about evil gamblers and tricksters outwitting great obstacles or succumbing to defeat. It was from Joe that I learned about those other kinds of wolves, those *loups-garoux*, those shape-shifters, and those poker-playing *manitous* who rode the boxcars of Joe's train, slipping silently off into the bush and doing things unimagined in my grade school library books. I loved the imaginative freedom these stories gave me. They laid the foundation for my understanding that our stories "begin with an argument based on the idea of chance and imagination as a source of meaning, rather than going for causation, closure and authority" (Pulitano 150). Any dry discussion of race as population genetics or contentious cultural category says nothing to me about the parts that spirit and tribal memories play in constructing our physical and social selves. My grandfather often sat with his crystal set, listening to the commentator's voice drifting over the border into Vassar as the New York Yankees played baseball. My Métis Grandmother sat by kerosene lamp, sewing all the uniforms for Grandfather's team, the best and only baseball team in Vassar. I draw on Vizenor's appreciation of the vitality of Indigenous oral narrative traditions here. My grandparents joined in the dialogue, participated in the "tricky" act of the exchange between their communities and the settler worlds, what Vizenor calls

discussions in the best sense of the word. It's engagement.... It's imagination.... It's a discourse.... It's liberation.... It's life, it's juice, it's energy.... But it's not a theory, it's not a monologue. (qtd. in Pulitano 148)

To me, this means that we Indigenous peoples have always loved a good story, a good game, a chance to participate, and have adapted to what we find in the places where we live.

My Task in Activism

Simply stated, my work within the academy and in urban settings is to bring to light Indigenous ways of understanding and acting in the world. It is a tricky task to preserve our memories and work cross-culturally. In graduate school I was offered post-colonialism, post-modernism, materialism, feminism, historicism, and contemporary theories of language as ways to theorize Native writing. I was intrigued by these approaches for what they reveal about the organizing principles of Eurocentric thinking, as they are used to probe for truths about real world experiences. Ultimately I refused them as unsuitable tools for the task of articulating Indigenous thought from within. I turned to Native writers and thinkers for some clues for how I should begin this work. Indigenous writers offer their thoughts as participants in discussion, engagement, shared discourse, not as theorists engaged in monologues. I believe that any search to clarify and share our insights must come first from ourselves: "We must determine our own identity within the parameters established by us" (Nyoongah qtd. in D'Cruz par. 5). In claiming the necessity for scholarship that is rooted in Indigenous communities we resist the genocidal gestures of appropriation. Having said this, if we are to work within the academy and within urban spaces, we are of necessity engaged in a cross-cultural dialogic. Academics interested in cross-cultural work need not approach this arena in fear and trembling. Mistakes are inevitable. When I enter the sacred space of ceremony, I leave academic logic outside. I sit in humility, grateful to be immersed in the language, the exuberance, the reverence, and the casual good humour that is so much in evidence as our communities heal and renew their ancient connections to the earth. I learn how little I know. I work hard, watching for guidance from those

more competent than I am. Picture me in Sheguiandah this spring, sitting on a piece of cardboard, trying to cut up moose ribs with a pen knife. I struggled gamely with that mountainous pile, all the while feeling panicky and embarrassed by my messy incompetence. Other busy women would glance my way in disbelief and (I hoped) sympathy. Some offered their knives. Finally a

tion is temporary, moving toward resolution of an ambiguous state. They remain in a confused state of identity, depicted as tragic and lost, until they return to a tribal center of culture. Some of these characters are depicted in such works as N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*.⁴

language that linguist Peter Bakker claims is unique in all the world's languages. And yet, the outpouring of creative literature by Indigenous writers in English encourages me. Our stories of endurance, our drive to retain Indigenous oral traditions in our projects, are vehicles of cultural survival as Indigenous scholars and grassroots activists. I search out native writers in English. I teach a

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much older woman wielding an efficient axe rescued me. I guess you need the right tools for the job.

For critical theorists, Gerald Vizenor's work provides the tools for creating a competent dialogic as he combines his knowledge of traditional oral traditions, contemporary Native writers and scholars, as well as academic critical theorists in order to "relocate it [the written word] for potential readers from the passive to the active realm of experience..." (Blaeser, 16). As an urban earth-diver,² I dig into Vizenor's vast body of writing to find many useful ideas. Choctaw scholar Louis Owens suggests that one of Vizenor's central aims is to free Indigenous identities from the "epic, absolute past that insists on stasis and tragedy for Native Americans." (Owens, 231) Examples of the kind of writing, which insists on stasis and tragedy for the Métis, are Joseph Howard's "*Strange Empire*," Marcel Giraud's *Le Métis Canadien* a racist tract in two volumes, and Gerhard Ens's *Homeland to Hinterland*, which seeks to demonstrate that the Métis ceased to exist when faced with the juggernaut of western capitalism. For some tribal-affiliated writers, the cross-blood (mixed blood or Métis) characters are treated as though their condi-

As I develop research projects and participate in community activities, I am mindful to resist mainstream and some tribal assumptions that Indigenous communities are fated to refer only to the past. Vizenor works to deconstruct what he sees as stereotypical and invented with the purpose of constructing a new authentic identity, existing at the intersections of cultures, surviving through constant struggle between subversion and balance (Blaeser 158). About the English language he says:

The English language has been the linear tongue of the colonial discoveries, racial cruelties, invented names, the simulation of tribal cultures, manifest manners, and the unheard literature of dominance in tribal communities. (1996: 105-106)

The "unheard literature of dominance" in our village and in modern urban spaces is the English language, "unheard" because it has become the ubiquitous and necessary tongue. The more my community spoke the language imposed in school, the less Michif was heard. My cousin Norman Fleury is one of the few remaining scholars of a

course on writers like Patricia Grace, (Maori) from New Zealand, Louise Erdrich, (Ojibwe) from White Earth Reservation, Minnesota, Lee Maracle, (Sto:loh First Nation), from Vancouver, Ruby Slipperjack, (Ojibwe), from Whitewater Lake Ontario, and Winona LaDuke, (Anishabe) from White Earth Reservation, Minnesota.

In his novel *Hotline Healers: An Almost Browne Novel*, Vizenor's character Almost Browne, is born "in the back seat of an unheated station wagon ... almost on the White Earth Reservation." Subversively, Vizenor has the agency nurse write on Almost's birth certificate, "gegaa, almost on the reservation" (1997: 9-10), while the family, the nuns, and the federal agent insists on changing the actual location of his birth. Is Almost Browne earnest and believable in his constant storytelling, or is he elusive, wily and dangerous? Throughout this novel, Vizenor makes the point that the truth of native reason is flux, chance, freedom, and humour. I think about Almost Browne when I am challenged by tribal peoples and non-Natives to identify solely with their social, cultural, and political agendas. I am of this land and I care little for invented names.

Vizenor uses his writing to teach a new way of thinking, a way that deliberately violates conventional codes and obvious categories, as a tool of liberation. Listen to what he says about the academy:

The University of California at Berkeley is a material reservation, a magic snapshot separation from the sacred, and, at

cultural expectations, and agenda. I faltered, and looked out the window as our program manager set out the parameters of the project. Withdrawal was my only strategy. Later on, several program managers expressed the opinion that our organization was getting “too top-heavy” with academics, who were difficult to work with. Since that early beginning, the MWC has writ-

Even though I did not write on the wall that hot summer day in the park, I do write on the wall in many ways. When I bring what I know of our Aboriginal worldviews to the academy, I write on the wall. I do not concern myself with the “manifest manners” (Vizenor’s term [1996: 105]) of terminal definitions that describe Indigenous Studies Programs either as tiny niche pro-

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the same time, this fantastic campus is a sweet place in the imagination, like an elevator filled with androgynous tale-bearers moving to the thirteenth floor in search of new spiritual teachers. (Vizenor 1981b: 389)

I think on these words. This vision leads me away from a defensive, exclusionary, and judgmental position as a native scholar in the academy, towards an opening up to an inherent multiplicity of experience. These words re-center my thinking within a perspective that knows that Indigenous knowledge is flux, change, chance, tease, humour, and healing.

From Theory to Action

How do chance, imagination, and survivance work in the academy and in community action? More than a dozen years ago, we formed the Métis Women’s Circle (MWC) in response to the urgings of our elders. By chance, we were invited to submit a proposal to the Federal Government for funding. Our program manager told us what we should write. I felt constrained and defined by government language,

ten and successfully implemented many projects with government and non-government sources of support. We have learned to turn away from strategic victimry, toward strategies of survivance, although mainstream supporters still insist on the problems and issues model, or on economic solutions to our community needs, often downplaying or refusing outright “the merely cultural” content of our work. We have learned to pose as program delivery agents, and to undermine that pose with humour, tricky strategies, and a willingness to see ourselves as tricksters, balancing between Indigenous words and Canadian institutions. The laughter and teasing during meetings is not merely a survival strategy, it bubbles up to the surface from deep wells of confidence and trust that our aboriginal ways, gifts from our Creator, still connect us to empowerment. During our meetings and throughout our conferences and workshops, we call on our elder relatives, bear, wolf, buffalo, sweetgrass, and tobacco, to direct us. We do lean heavily on “the merely cultural” to transform and align our projects to capture desired Indigenous outcomes. Such “measurable outcomes” are sometimes hard to evaluate on final report forms.

gram that will always lose money, or as political gesture. I concentrate on the students who come to my classes, and attempt to model for them a dialogic that is not a separatist one, an “us and them” approach, but rather an attempt to work together on to understand how Native writers produce their unique critical approaches to our lived experiences and what our value and meaning is within a global perspective.

The Métis Women’s Circle holds cultural gatherings that bring Aboriginal people from across Canada together. At one of our gatherings we listened to Ojibwe painter Randy Charbonneau weave the traditional figures within his paintings into stories of recovery from a very long prison sentence. We sang together in an Iroquoian longhouse, to honour those who had lived in that place five hundred years or more ago, and we sat on the earth and listened to Norah Calliou from Paddle Prairie Métis Settlement in Alberta, who gave her medicine teachings cautiously, carefully, in the certain knowledge that translation from Cree into English can mean a betrayal of those teachings. Vizenor says that it is not possible to translate Native traditions and literatures into English without privileging one language and culture

over another, without becoming an object of comparison, with the dominant culture as master template. And yet, English is the language he works in, the language I work in. For Vizenor, Native authors who write in English can carry forward “the shadows of tribal creative literature” (1997: 13). These shadows, or remembered oral tradition, can bring life to our contemporary survival in urban places. When I see crows perched on a shopping mall roof I think of crow stories, their dances and their doings, as they have always figured in the stories of our peoples (Vizenor 1992).⁵

We participate in gatherings, at private celebrations, at powwows and Aboriginal Days and many multicultural and inter-faith events. We offer our ways of reverence and respect. We wear the Métis sash and choose to decorate our space with historic signs of identity: moccasins, beaded clothing, and Métis flags. To be visible is not necessarily to be understood as we would like, but it is a beginning, a way of re-writing ourselves into an urban landscape that has all but erased us. The powerless, the resentful, the ignorant, and the mischievous scratch or spray their messages on urban walls. We privileged few Native peoples who are academics and professionals write indigeneity into our research efforts, and in gathering elders’ stories to pondering their contemporary meanings. We talk to newspaper journalists at public events and usually end up on the social events pages in (often) unflattering photos, as examples of unity in diversity. We rehearse our roots, our histories, by telling stories at live interpretation centers.

In June of 2005, the first graduate from our Indigenous Studies program attended convocation. We made him a silk ceremonial scarf, beaded with wampum beads depicting the bowl and one spoon treaty. We have honoured this treaty of friendship and sharing between the Haudenasaunee and Anishi-

naabe for a very long time. We did not ask permission to do this. This brought a predictable response from the academy. We could not allow this student to display his sash on the outside of his graduation gown. This would be a break with university tradition. It was a disappointing decision. However, the following year a Tuscarora beader from Six Nations was set to work, Senate permission obtained, and this past year at Wilfrid Laurier University’s Convocation, our Indigenous Studies graduates, both Native and non-Native, wore their purple beaded sashes over their black robes; a sweet little triumph. Collectively, Indigenous scholars seek to challenge institutional, structural, and inter-personal tensions by carving a responsive discursive space wherein we write our indigeneity. Some of us write in elegant and precise ways, and some of us mangle moose ribs. No matter. In our collaborative efforts or in the sacred lodges, it is the spirit of openness, humility, and teachability that counts.

Carole Leclair is a Red River Métis, graduate of York University’s Faculty of Environmental Studies, and Associate Professor of Contemporary Studies/ Indigenous Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford. Leclair is one of the increasing numbers of Indigenous women who come late to a university career. She combines many years of grassroots activism within the Métis Women’s Circle with a love of the exchange of ideas in academia. She celebrates the opportunities to carry Indigenous cultural knowledge to its hallowed halls. Leclair is the current coordinator of the Indigenous Studies Program at Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford.

¹Zibi Anishaabeg First Nations near Maniwaki, western Québec awoke to discover their Community Centre defaced on every wall with racist slogans. A recent land claim settlement in the town of Maniwaki may have sparked the incident.

²Vizenor (1981a) invents this phrase, a derivative from Anishinaabe creation stories which tell of a time when the earth was covered with water and the lowly muskrat succeeded in diving to the bottom of the ocean, retrieving a small amount of earth, enough to begin to restore the earth. Urban “earth-divers” plunge into the vast multicultural ocean in order to re-create Indigenous worlds (6).

³For a rich assessment of the mixed-blood identity questions in Erdrich, see Peterson.

⁴See Vizenor (1992) for brilliant and subversive stories of animals in the cities.

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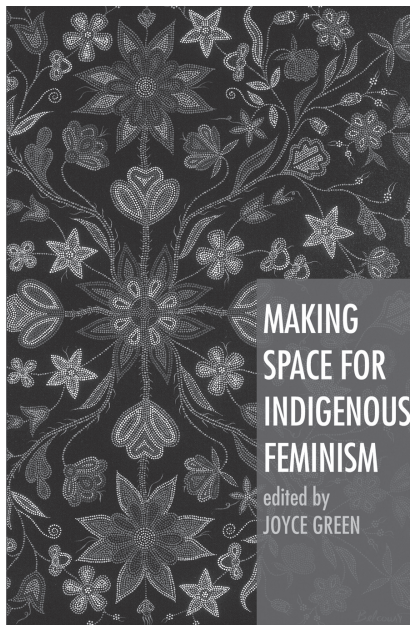
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