Inventing The Trickster Nation: *The Heirs Of Columbus*

Inventando a nação *Trickster*: The Heirs Of Columbus

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Abstract

The present article discusses hybridity as a strategy of postcolonial resistance in Gerald Vizenor's novel *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991). In this work, the Native American author deconstructs the historical figure of Christopher Columbus in the five hundredth anniversary of his arrival in the American Continent. Moreover, the novel reaffirms the trickster play with colonialism as a means of Native survival in contemporary North American society.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Native North-American literature, tricksters.

Resumo

O presente artigo discute o hibridismo como estratégia de resistência pós-colonial no romance de Gerald Vizenor *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991). Nessa obra, o autor indígena norte-americano desconstrói a figura histórica de Cristóvão Colombo no aniversário de quinhentos anos de sua chegada no Continente Americano. Além disso, o romance confirma o jogo do trickster com o colonialismo como uma forma de sobrevivência para o ameríndio na sociedade norte-americana contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Pós-colonialismo, Literatura Indígena Norte-Americana, tricksters.

Native literature is concerned with the consequences of the colonial encounter for the Natives in contemporary North America. Furthermore, Native writers have assumed the important task of revising colonial history and resisting the myths created by colonialism. Professor of American Studies and Native American literature at the University of California, Berkeley, Gerald Vizenor is considered one of the leading voices on Native American literature. As a novelist, poet, and essayist, he is the author of more than twenty books, including the American Book Award 1988 winner *Griever: An American Monkey King*

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in China, and the Josephine Miles Award 1990 winner *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors*. He also received research grants for writing from University of Minnesota Graduate School, and the Fiction Collective Prize in 1986.

Gerald Vizenor is a Métis Minnesota, a mixedblood descent from Quebec (French descent) and the Native Chippewa. In his introduction to *Earthdivers: Tribal Narratives on Mixed Descent* (1981), he affirms that the Métis were the first earthdivers. The earthdiver is an important metaphor to define the Native writers's strategy of resistance: they dive into contemporary society, which is still full of contradictions and prejudice, to create a new "island," or a new consciousness for the ambiguous mixedblood existence.

In *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), Vizenor makes reference to the *Anishinaabe* earthdiver trickster *Naanabozho*, "who assists him in remembering 'how to turn pain and horror into humor'" (McCaffery and Marshall 289). In the first chapter, the author retells the *Anishinaabe* – or Chippewa – tale in which *Naanabozho* finds himself in the middle of his own shit and has to invent a whole new world out of it to find some freedom. The heirs of Columbus's New World is like that. In the middle of capitalist and racist attitudes, they create a "New America" to celebrate the hybrid and ambiguous identity of the mixedblood as the best postcolonial condition. This is confirmed in the novel by the statement that mongrels represent the best race, since "the best humans" are mongrels: Columbus, Jesus, Mayans, Jews and Moors.

In this novel, Vizenor contests the idea of the authentic, victimized Native, the romantic ideal of the Native who lives away from civilization and is a victim of Columbus's enterprise in the American Continent. Instead, he portrays Natives in contemporary American society and deconstructs official history through the celebration of the trickster figure and his humorous language game. Moreover, the author celebrates the hybrid condition of the mixedblood, or crossblood, the descendant of both Western and tribal races, which results in a criticism of colonialist ideas and practices which still affirm a history of racism.

Published in the year before Columbus's quincentenary in America, the novel criticizes in advance the celebrations of Columbus's anniversary. Furthermore, it shows that there is no reason for celebration of a capitalist civilization which sees the culture of Native Americans as exotic objects of museums. Vizenor rewrites the history of Columbus only to affirm that even the "discoverer" of the American Continent was a crossblood: a descendant of Mayan and Jewish peoples. The main characters of the novel are tricksters and shaman figures who live on the reservation and declare themselves the heirs of Columbus. The heirs are both humans and animals: Memphis is a black panther, Caliban is a white mongrel, and Samana is a shaman bear. Other trickster characters establish the contact between the Western and tribal worlds. Almost Browne, a name that reaffirms his mixedblood and ambiguous condition, dazzles the reservation and the trickster nation with technological laser shows. The lawyer and international fashion model Felipa Flowers is the trickster poacher who recovers Columbus's remains.

Kirkpatrick Sale affirms that Columbus is not a character in the novel, but rather "an idea, manipulated by the author on the one hand and a modern Indian character named Stone Columbus on the other" (488). Stone Columbus is the heir who dresses himself as Christopher Columbus. Genetic analysis and the comparison of Stone's gene signature to Columbus's bones and dried blood on a lead ball found at the bottom of his casket proved Stone's descent. In the story, he is a leader, but instead of perpetuating Columbus's colonialist interests, he devotes himself to the recovery of the heirs's history and to the creation of the tribal healing society. Binn Columbus is Stone's mother, and his father, like Columbus's father, is a weaver. The difference is that, as a contemporary character, he also has a doctorate in Consciousness Studies from the University of California.

These mixedblood heirs are earthdivers: they dive into their past and into contemporary society in order to recover their origins and resist colonization. Past and present live together on the reservation: Stone Columbus directs the Santa Maria Casino, which as Columbus's ship, sinks in a storm. He is also interviewed by Admiral Luckie White on Carp

Radio, where he plays with the official history of Columbus to recover the past of the heirs.

Each autumn the heirs of Columbus gather at the "Stone Tavern," a sacred place laid on a mount at the rise of a natural meadow, near the headwaters of the Mississippi River, to retell the story of the admiral and resurrect their past. They believe that once the stones told trickster stories, and now they are the silent elements which not only keep history, but also listen to the heirs' stories about Columbus and his trickster lineage.

The heirs decide to recover Columbus's remains in order to keep them in the "House of Life:" "the burial ground for the lost and lonesome bones that were liberated by the heirs from museums" (5). Felipa is designated for the mission, and, with the help of a shaman, she takes the remains from the Brotherhood of American Explorers. Although the heirs go to court for that, they end up convincing the judge and the audience of the hearing of their right to keep the remains, since they are the documented heirs of the admiral.

The story takes a turn when Felipa is assassinated as she attempts to recover Pocahonta's remains[1]. Felipa's murder leads to the foundation of the trickster society on the border between the United States and Canada. After her death, the heirs move to the nation of Point Assinika and transport the House of Life and the Stone Tavern to their new place. In the new nation, the heirs create the Felipa Flowers Casino and build the Statue of the Trickster of Liberty. Also, they start genetic therapy in order to invent a tribal identity and heal wounded people.

The trickster nation calls the government's attention, and some investigators are sent to control and report what happens at Point Assinika. In addition, the cannibal windigoo, who is always trying to destroy the heirs, comes back to terrify and devour them. In the end of the novel, the heirs confront the windigoo and win the moccasin game.

The novel is divided into two main sections: "Blue Moccasins" and "Point Assinika," respectively the names of a game and of the new nation. Each section concerns a strategy to resist colonization. In "Blue Moccasins," the heirs try to recover their origins and history by getting back Columbus's remains and retelling the story of the admiral. The murder of Felipa sets the beginning of the second section and shows that recovering their origins was not a successful strategy. In "Point Assinika," instead of *recovering* their past, the heirs *invent* their origins by creating the crossblood nation and a hybrid tribal identity. Moreover, the heirs deconstruct the colonial concepts of "nation" and "identity." Since the nation is settled *on* the border between Canada and the United States, there is no border in Point Assinika. Also, there is no pure identity, and anyone who shares tribal values can have a hybrid identity and become tribal.

The history of Columbus is retold in the first three chapters of "Blue Moccasins." From the fourth chapter on, the focus of the novel is mainly on the history of the heirs. Consequently, the focus is not on the colonizer, but rather on the colonized. The story is devoted to the heirs rather than to Columbus. Yet, Columbus is important in the story as the ancestor whose story of colonization pushes the Natives' fight for their rights and a better society.

The last chapter, before the epilogue, portrays the climax of the story: the heirs have to play the moccasin game with the cannibal windigoo. The heirs are victorious and the novel has a "happy end." However, since the novel defends hybridity as a form of postcolonial resistance, this "happy end" does not mean that the heirs *destroyed* the windigoo, because one element of opposition needs the other if hybridity is to be maintained. Although the heirs win one game, there will never be a last game for the windigoo, who represents the colonialist force.

According to Homi K. Bhabha (1994), the structure and content of a hybrid text do not contrast or deny the colonizer's Western tradition, but promote the interference and participation of the colonized's culture in that discourse. This idea is validated in *The Heirs of Columbus*, since the colonizer's official history is contaminated by popular forms of discourse and by the trickster version of Columbus's arrival in the American Continent. The

[1] Pocahontas was born in Virginia in 1595 and her tribal name was *Matoaka*. She was betrothed to John Rolfe, an English tobacco grower, and married on April 5, 1614. Peter Hulme has a very detailed study about Pocahontas and the English colonization of Virginia in *Colonial Encounters* (1986).

structure of the novel is also marked by hybridity: it presents a constant dialogue with theory and criticism, clearly exemplified by the epilogue. In this section, Vizenor names the bibliographic sources for the several quotations presented in the novel. According to the author, he bothers to show the books he consulted because he does not "see a great difference between history and fiction. A particular kind of fiction." (Miller 92).

The novel also shows that Vizenor's literature is not composed of different and isolated narratives: his works are often intertexts of his other novels or short stories. In *The Heirs of Columbus*, there is reference to at least three other books: *Earthdivers* (1981), *The Trickster of Liberty* (1988) and the short story collection *Landfill Meditations* (1991). The myth of the earthdiver trickster *Naanabozho* and the heirs' dive into their origins are intertexts of *Earthdivers*. Also, the unfinished statue of the Trickster of Liberty in the novel by the same title is finally completed, and the laser trickster Almost Browne, who is the protagonist of the short story "Feral Lasers" in *Landfill Meditations*, is part of the heirs' healing society.

More than that, the author establishes an intertextuality with different writing genres, both traditional and popular: history, fiction and mass culture. The mixture of genres is important for the structure of the novel, which reaffirms writing as play and values both official and marginal discourses.

Gerald Vizenor proposes the creation of a trickster "post-indian" society in which "humor rules and tricksters heal" (126). The trickster heirs survive in capitalist America through the use of both Native culture and technological advances. They establish a crossblood healing society that can save the Natives, the children and the world from the Old World "culture of death." In "On Thin Ice You Might as Well Dance," McCaffery and Marshall point out that *The Heirs of Columbus* provides "a perfect example of how Vizenor has used his "'trickster' literary program to construct a means of escaping victimization" (288).

When interviewed by McCaffery and Marshall, Vizenor affirmed that he "wanted to make [his] revisionist story of the last five hundred years serve tribal interests and changes, rather than continuing to serve the white liberal interests of having Indians as victims" (297). In a mythic way, he wants to heal the mutants of Columbus's "Chemical Civilization" and tell for the first time a Native version of the story of who Columbus *becomes*. In his story, the tricksters rewrite Columbus's history and make him somebody "far more interesting than he was in his own life" (297). Moreover, Columbus serves the "revolution" by helping to create the tribal mixedblood society, since his heirs take advantage of their descent when they fight for their rights.

Vizenor does not criticize or affirm the figure of the "Admiral of the Ocean Sea." Instead, he subverts the meaning of Columbus's voyage to the American continent. Official history supports the idea that the European Columbus *discovered* America. Vizenor contradicts this version and affirms that Columbus came to America in search of his Mayan descent, to recover his Native origins. Christopher Columbus, who was cursed with a twisted penis that made intercourse painful, came to the American Continent in search of his Mayan origins and found Samana, the Native golden hand talker. Samana saved him from his curse, he fell in love with her, and they had a child also called Samana. This colonial "encounter" established the crossblood heritage of Columbus.

In *Trickster Makes this World*, Hyde affirms that boundary is where the trickster will be found (7). *The Heirs of Columbus* celebrates this condition. The trickster heirs are not only shape-shifters, but also boundary-crossers. They are on the border between the Western and tribal worlds, and avoid any univocal position or terminal creed. Because their trickster nation also needs an ambiguous settlement, it is settled at Point Assinika, on the border between the United States and Canada.

The trickster is not only a character in Vizenor's literature, it also establishes a peculiar form of discourse, which values humor and imagination, language play, and ambiguity. Parody is also an important element for trickster narratives. As a double coded discourse, it establishes a textual dialogue in which Columbus's official history only has importance by the interrelation to its Native version. Therefore, it represents discourse "on the border."

The trickster rewriting of Columbus

shows, in Vizenor's revisionist efforts, traces of postmodernism and deconstructionism. Both Arnold Krupat and Alan Velie point to the influence of Vizenor's reading of the French deconstructionists in his writing. In "Beyond the novel Chippewa-style: Gerald Vizenor's post-modern fiction," Velie affirms that Vizenor's literature acknowledges the partiality of truth, and presents writing as play with a peculiar Native sense of humor (137). Playful versions of history are pervasive in *The Heirs of Columbus*.

The title sets the hybrid logic of the novel, which focuses on the contact between Columbus and *his* America, and his heirs' trickster version of history. Based on the assumption that trickster narratives value heterogeneous and ambiguous discourses, this analysis demonstrates how hybridity is present in *The Heirs of Columbus*, both in the structure, evinced in a hybrid literary genre, and in the content of the novel, which focuses on the celebration of tricksters and mixedbloods. I analyze the effective strategies of postcolonial resistance made possible by hybridity in the two sections of the novel: "Blue Moccasins" and "Point Assinika." Finally, I discuss the possible dangers involved in the play with colonialism. The emphasis on play can be a dangerous strategy of Native resistance, and the heirs' victory only transitory.

BLUE MOCCASINS

In "Blue Moccasins," the heirs of Columbus still live on the reservation, which is not a place isolated from capitalist interference. On the reservation, the heirs get together to retell their past. They attempt to recover their origins in three situations: first, Stone Columbus tells his story as Columbus's descendant in Carp Radio. From chapters one to three, the heirs retell the history about Columbus. Finally, in chapter four, Felipa Flowers tries to recover the heirs' origins by getting back Columbus's remains.

In the first chapter, a radio talk show is run by Admiral Luckie White, who interviews Stone Columbus in the "Santa Maria Casino." Carp Radio, a pun with the Latin expression "Carp Diem:" seize the day, emphasizes the trickster's survival play as the strategy to resist colonization. It is part of the reservation, thus it is the mass media channel through which the heirs' voice is heard in the United States. Although part of Western culture, the radio is much more appropriate to a trickster discourse, since it tends to motivate imagination more than the visual media. Admire, the mongrel heir, subverts our perception of reality and defends the imaginative power of the radio: "'Radio is real, television is not'" (8). Stone Columbus also affirms that radio is real, and " 'the rest is bad television': [...] 'what we hear on radio is what we see, and the remains, mean crows and evangelists, are poses on television'" (124).

The structure of the radio talk show is used, for example, when Luckie White interviews Stone Columbus:

> "Admiral Luckie White is on the air, your late night host and voice of the night on Carp Radio." The radio was heard in four directions from enormous loudspeakers on the masts of the casino and the caravels. "Columbus is back to answer your questions and mine tonight. Here we go once more with the truth in the dark, so, how do you expect our listeners to buy the stories that your brother is a stone, a common rock?"
>
> "Stone is my name, not my brother, and we are not common," said Stone Columbus. (9)

As a media channel, radio depends on the capitalist contribution of commercials. Carp Radio is not different from that, but it makes use of capitalism to spread the news about the Native heirs and their tribal world, and to tell "the truth in the dark," which means a tribal version of what is considered true in Columbus's history: " 'The truth at last, but first a commercial announcement from those wise companies that buy our time and make truth possible in the dark', said Admiral White" (10). The idea of "truth" is deconstructed when Stone Columbus answers the questions. Besides the confusion and constant changes about the dates in Columbus's history, the trickster strategy is to frustrate any intention of finding closure or definite answers, since the trickster heirs "imagine the starts but never the ends" (173).

The "historical truth" about Columbus is deconstructed in the first three chapters, in

which the heirs recover the story of the admiral. Although the dialogue with mass culture, as exemplified by Columbus's participation in the radio program, is important to the hybrid structure of the novel, it is the dialogue between history and fiction which is most significant. This dialogue not only rewrites the history of Columbus, but also celebrates hybridity both as structure (parody) and content (a mixedblood Columbus) in the novel.

Vizenor's deconstructionist opinion that there is no great distinction between history and fiction governs his rewriting of the official history of Columbus. He not only quotes parts of translations of Columbus's *Journal* to affirm his version, but also brings quotations from other historical books in order to legitimate his rewriting. In *Postindian Conversations*, Vizenor points out that Christopher Columbus was not "the only traveler who had the enthusiasm and maybe stupidity to set sail in search of another continent" (128). In his version, Natives found him centuries earlier, when they landed in Europe and the Mediterranean. In *The Heirs of Columbus*, then, Columbus is "a crossblood descendant of the ancient Natives, and he was teased by this inheritance to return to his ancestral homeland" (*Postindian Conversations* 129).

The retelling of history in the novel results in a hybrid text. The author does not contest official documents, but uses them as part of his fictional version. Documents and literature contaminate each other, and *The Heirs of Columbus* fills in the gaps of official history in a mythical and humorous way. In the novel, Vizenor makes use of the official narrative in order to prove his thesis that Columbus is a Mayan descendant and comes back to America in search of his Native origins. The first chapter starts with a mixture of Columbus's descriptions in his *Journal*, which are quoted in the text, and the author's Native version of the story:

> Christopher Columbus saw a blue light in the west, but "it was such an uncertain thing," he wrote in his journal to the crown, "that I did not feel it was adequate proof of land." That light was a torch raised by the silent hand talkers, a summons to the New World. Since then, the explorer has become a trickster healer in the stories told by his tribal heirs at the headwaters of the great river. (3)

The heirs of Columbus get together at the "Stone Tavern" to remember their "stories in the blood," the stories about the colonial encounter of Columbus and the Natives. In "Storm Puppets," the third chapter, the history of Columbus and his voyages to America is retold by the heirs. Binn Columbus has the power to hear objects, and she "hears" Columbus's story in a letter found in the sea and in the partial remains of the mariner. This chapter is a parody of famous books about Columbus, such as *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*, and of the translations of the *Journal*. As a hybrid and double discourse, parody reaffirms an official text by writing it differently. Hence, Vizenor validates his version "scientifically" by quoting parts of these historical documents, while filling their gaps humorously.

Vizenor's narrative repeats the official history of Columbus's family, the son of Domenico Colombo e Susanna di Fontanarossa. Information about the admiral's physical appearance is presented in the novel in a quotation from *The Life of the Admiral*. The author keeps the description made by Hernando Columbus, one of the admiral's sons: "The Admiral was a well built man of more than medium stature, long visaged with cheeks somewhat high, but neither fat nor thin" (30). However, Vizenor subverts the historical narratives by adding a comic reference to a malformation in Columbus's genitals:

> Columbus was pained by persistent erections; his enormous clubbed penis curved to the right, a disease of fibrous contracture during erection. He was born with a burdensome penis that once was presented as comic in ancient dramas. The smaller penis was a prick of endearment in some coteries; his was a torturous penis, a curse that turned the mere thought of sexual pleasure to sudden pain. (31)

In this part of the narrative, Vizenor recovers the metaphor that associates the colonizer taking possession of the mother land to a man possessing a woman sexually. Columbus cannot possess the land, nor the Native women: "He could not masturbate or have intercourse without pain, and the hard curve of his penis made intromission even more arduous" (31). Furthermore, it is Samana, a

Native woman, who heals his sexual problem. She is never named as a Native, but as a *hand talker* and a *healer*: "She was a healer, and he was lost in her hands, but she was never tribal because she was not a slave in his name" (38).

Fiction and fact are mixed in this trickster narrative, and Vizenor quotes an unknown text, probably part of his own fiction. Columbus describes Samana as the Native hand talker who had "golden breasts and thighs, [...] the first woman who moved [him] from the curse of [his] secret pain." According to the narrator, Columbus wrote a secret letter at sea on his return from the first voyage. The letter was sealed in a container to survive a storm, and announced his discoveries, insecurities, visions, wild pleasures with the hand talker and the liberation from his curse. Vizenor legitimates his subversion by quoting Samuel Eliot Morison's *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*. In this book, Morison confirms that Columbus wrote a brief account of the voyage and discoveries, "wrapped the parchment in a waxed cloth, ordered it to be headed up in a great wooden barrel, and cast into the sea" (31). However, the narrator in *The Heirs of Columbus* adds one more fact, and affirms that "Columbus worried to his death that his letter would be found at sea, and that he would be tried to defend his sanity over the stories of the storm puppets and a hand talker with golden thighs" (44).

Vizenor quotes Columbus's words to introduce Samana in the history of the admiral's arrival in America. According to the narrator, Columbus never mentioned her in the letter to the monarchs, but he "unwittingly" counted her as one of the tribal people on the caravels. First, the quotation of official documents proves that the admiral wrote he would take six Natives with him when he departed. Nevertheless, on October 14, "he wrote in his journal, 'Your Highnesses will see this for yourselves when I bring to you the *seven* that I have taken'" (37) (emphasis added).

Revisions of official history have questioned the real intentions of Columbus's voyages to the American Continent. Vizenor explores this discussion in the third chapter of the novel. He quotes Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise* and replaces the ideas in the book with his own version of the story. In *The Conquest of Paradise*, Sale affirms that if Columbus really planned to go to Cathay and the realm of the Grand Kahn, he would not take with him little trinkets, beads and bells to trade with. Vizenor concludes that, although other historical reasons have prevailed, as honor and wealth, the explanation is that the mariner "heard stories in his blood and would return to the New World" (35).

Deconstruction and hybridization are not only forms of criticism of official history. Sometimes they even neutralize any opinion in favor or against dominating discourses, since they reject discourses which privilege any single position. Vizenor deconstructs official history with humor and parody, as exemplified above, but, although parody and humor are political strategies in the novel, the author is more successful in denouncing the atrocities of Columbus's colonization by introducing "bitter ironies" in his narrative.

Even though Vizenor does not demonstrate any explicit criticism of Columbus's and his crew's brutality in America, he signals to the painful process of colonization and portrays the "Chemical Society" which resulted from that. Since the relationship between colonizer and colonized is the one of master and slave, the only alternative to deconstruct this discourse in the novel is to establish Columbus's relationship with Samana, a mythical figure.

The irony that Samana cannot be named "tribal" because she would then become a "slave" allows Vizenor to criticize Columbus's tyranny. The author recovers Columbus's words in his *Journal*, in which he affirms that "the tribal people on the island 'ought to be good servants and of good skill, for I see that they repeat very quickly all that is said to them'" (38). In addition, Vizenor quotes historical accounts confirming that Columbus's relationship to the Natives was only that of master and slaves, and states that "cruel and bitter ironies abound in the missions of wealth and Old World civilizations. Overnight his [Columbus's] discoveries reduced tribal cultures to the status of slaves; at the same time the stories in his blood were liberated by a tribal hand talker" (41).

Nevertheless, Vizenor's deconstructive task is to unbalance any binary oppositions

between good and evil, master and slave. In his text, Columbus can not be associated only to an evil figure, since he is a mixedblood. Therefore, he inverts the master/slave binary opposition to establish a *différance*, the interdependence between the two forces (Culler, 1983), by affirming that Columbus is *also* a slave:

> Columbus could have been remembered as the unvarnished slave of the Old World; he avouched his mission to the monarchs, and at the same time he carried the signature of survivance, the unrevealed stories in his blood, and the curse of a clubbed penis. Samana liberated his soul, his stories, and his passion; even so, his search for wealth would never be realized. He died a renounced slave to the monarchs in Vallodolid, Spain, on May 20, 1506, and was first buried in San Francisco de la Santa María de la Antigua. (38)

Vizenor's parody also denounces Columbus's capitalist intentions in America, his loss of control in the settlements, and his violence. At first, the tribal humorous story of the admiral whose "bones and memories ached for the hand talker" (41), who had saved him from his curse and vanished, deconstructs Columbus's thirst for gold with humor: "Nothing but gold would ease his worries and sense of spiritual separation" (41). However, this statement introduces another "bitter irony" in the story. Instead of promoting a good relationship between Columbus and the Natives, Samana increases the admiral's thirst for gold, and does not stop the colonizer's violence. Two pages later, we come to know that Columbus's ship *Santa Maria* "sank on a mission the tribes would never survive", since "the Old World lust for gold would silence tribal names and stories in a decade" (43).

The author also registers the massacre at *La Villa de la Navidad* and presents the violent Columbus who commands the crew, very different from that "in love with" Samana: " 'The sailors were ready, since I always advised my men to be on guard,' he wrote in his journal. 'They gave one Indian a great cut on the buttocks and wounded another in the breast with an arrow' " (43).

Columbus represents a mark in the expansion of capitalism, and his heirs live in the society which resulted from his enterprise. In *The Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor acknowledges America as both the Continent and the United States of America, since that country is the best example of Columbus's enterprise: a capitalist and chemical society. The trickster heirs live in the United States five hundred years after Columbus's arrival, and they show how American society consolidates Columbus's thirst for "gold" in its greed for money.

The story of Felipa Flowers and Doric Michéd is a good example of this greed for money. In the fourth chapter, Felipa searches for Columbus's remains and the novel becomes a detective story. The heirs need to recover Columbus's remains from the Brotherhood of American Explorers in order to develop gene therapy and make the world "tribal." Felipa Flowers is the heir in charge of that, and she is successful. However, she is victim of a trap when she travels to London to recover Pocahonta's remains, and ends up assassinated. Chaine Louis Riel, the private investigator, and Captain Treves Brink help to solve this mystery. They discover that Doric Michéd, the crossblood who is a member of the Brotherhood of American Explorers, is the criminal.

Although a crossblood, Doric is part of the Brotherhood of American Explorers and shares the whites' interests in selling Native culture. He is an evil force in the story, associated with the colonizer and the tribal figure of the windigoo. When Felipa says that medicine pouches were *stolen* from the tribe, Doric prefers the language of colonization: "*Discover* is more accurate" (50).

Felipa Flowers recovers Columbus's remains through trickery. A shaman becomes invisible and helps her to take the remains, so that no evidence is left of the theft. However, the heirs of Columbus are called for a court hearing. The heirs subvert not only the crime – they say there is nothing to be stolen, since Columbus's remains belong to his descendants – but also the formal discourse of the hearing, which is parodied and ends up in a laser show.

Carp radio transmits the unusual judicial hearing, which "would depend more on imagination than on material representations" (65), and would favor tribal consciousness. The incredible hearing of "the crime that was stolen"

to demonstrate to the court "the evidence nobody had" attracted great popular attention. In a mixture of a show and a federal hearing, "The judge reserved several rows at the front of the courtroom; the other seats were sold to the first hundred people in line" (65). The presentation of Almost Browne's laser show and virtual realities as evidence impressed so much the judge that she considered them admissible at trials.

The association of Columbus with colonization and capitalism is reinforced by Felipa's murder. The tribal character is murdered because of Columbus's remains and Doric's capitalist interests. The president of the explorers's club had promised to sell Columbus's remains for reburial in a quincentenary mausoleum dedicated to the admiral in the Dominican Republic. The price of the remains was at least ten million dollars. Doric killed Felipa to steal Pocahontas's remains, which she had just recovered. He planned to exchange them for Columbus's remains, which the heirs kept on the reservation. He would have both personal gain and fame with that achievement.

The episode of Felipa's death has a great importance in the novel. First, it suggests that Columbus's quincentenary only reaffirms the capitalist intentions of colonization and the violent and discriminatory treatment of Natives. Moreover, it introduces the second part of the novel, "Point Assinika," and motivates Stone Columbus to move with the heirs to a "new nation," where they start the trickster crossblood society devoted to healing.

POINT ASSINIKA

The nation of Point Assinika, otherwise named Point Roberts, is situated in the Strait of Georgia between Semiahmoo, Washington State, and Vancouver Island, Canada. The nation "on the border" is declared sovereign by the heirs of Christopher Columbus exactly on the five hundredth anniversary of the admiral in America: "October 12, 1992." Vizenor recreates America in its quincentenary, but does not deny Columbus's official narrative. Stone Columbus repeats Columbus's discourse in his *Journal* when he arrives at Point Assinika. However, technological advances and the motivation to keep a hybrid text contaminate the novel's discourse, and Stone repeats Columbus's speech in a different situation. Instead of writing a log-book, he participates in a talk show:

> 'No sooner had we concluded the formalities of taking possession of the point than people began to come to the beach, all as pale as their mothers bore them, and the women also, although we did not see more than one very young girl' said Stone Columbus on Carp Radio. (119)

Victorious in the trickster hearing, but afflicted with Felipa's death, the heirs move to the new nation and start genetic therapy. References to genetic engineering, robots, mutation and biological experiments introduce a new discourse in the second part of the novel. Science fiction, then, becomes the next popular genre in an intertext made up of a novel, a radio talk show, and a tribal hearing. The development of genetic experiments and mutation is something that scares Vizenor and promotes his sometimes dark vision of the world. Nevertheless, genetic experiments are practiced in the novel in order to end up racial discrimination and install the crossblood society.

Another element in the science fiction discourse is the metaphor "Chemical Civilization," which Vizenor associates with our Western five-hundred-year history of chemical usage. This metaphor is particularly emphasized in the end of the novel, when the children that arrive at the nation of Point Assinika prove to be victims of chemical contamination. In fact, the trickster nation is a place of weird, sensitive and wounded people. When the children entered the casino in the nation, they "hobbled and limped, some without legs, other without arms, and many who were blind, but no one seemed to notice, because most of the gamblers in the casino were wounded, deformed, grotesque" (145). According to this description, the present world is a place of disabled and fragmented people, which is a very relevant metaphor to express the sense of loss that people have in postmodern society. The loss in human relations and values cannot be filled in by technological advances and materialism, so much so that, in

the novel, people move to the tricksters' nation to be healed.

Point Assinika is the ultimate defense of hybridity in the novel, and the trickster heirs emphasize they want to create a mixedblood America, very different from that of Columbus's discourse. As in the previous examples, in this part of the novel the author also introduces Columbus's words in order to legitimate the nation and to present his "bitter" ironies. Stone Columbus affirms they took possession of the point in the name of their genes and of the wild tricksters of liberty, and ironically makes reference to American racism and the necessity of registering anything according to "White American" law, which is the "authentic" and "official" discourse in the United States. Since the American stereotype is the "blond," and American society usually recognizes Natives' history and culture only when it is part of anthropological research, Stone affirms that they made all the "necessary" declarations and had these testimonies recorded by a "blond anthropologist" (119).

Columbus's heirs create a new America and recreate the United States for the Natives. In Point Assinika, the statue of the "Trickster of Liberty" is higher than the Statue of Liberty, and "the inscription on the statue promised to 'heal the tired and huddled masses yearning to breathe free'" (122). The Trickster of Liberty finally promotes the freedom that the American statue promised to *everybody* coming from across the ocean, but never given to the Natives.

Point Assinika is "claimed by the heirs as a free state with no prisons, no passports, no public schools, no missionaries, no television, and no public taxation" (124). Vizenor's novel also shows that it is the place where American capitalism and technology can contribute to heal people and turn them "tribal." Genetic therapies, natural medicine, bingo cards, and entertainment are forms of healing, and are free to those who come to be healed and those who live on the point.

The objective of this utopian nation is to make the world tribal and create a universal crossblood identity. Anyone who wants to be tribal is accepted in Point Assinika. However, Stone explains that he resists any notion of blood quantum and racial identification. Hence, the tribal universal identity is much more related to tribal consciousness than to tribal blood, and it is given through genetic therapy to those dedicated to "heal rather than steal tribal cultures" (162).

Arnold Krupat recognizes that this idealist nation is a contradictory element in Vizenor's celebration of ambivalence, since it has a univocal aim: "healing" the human race. Moreover, the last scene in the novel is a happy end, which promotes some closure in the narrative. Although the basis of the new society – humor in stories, genetic therapy and gambling – confirms the celebration of trickster play, deconstruction and hybridity, which are the elements of postcolonial resistance in the novel, it is possible to detect the limitations of such strategies as forces of resistance, which could explain the necessity of giving some closure to the story.

Krupat's "*Ratio*- and *Natio*- in Vizenor's *Heirs of Columbus*" is a very detailed study of the hybrid nature of Vizenor's tribal identity and the genetic therapy developed in Point Assinika. First, he analyzes Columbus's descent and the affirmation that the admiral came to America because he heard "stories in the blood." According to Krupat, the expression "stories in the blood" occurs approximately fifty-three times in the novel, and it is relevant to the concept of tribal identity because it takes into account both national and rational elements of identification.

For Krupat, the fact that Columbus is a Mayan and Jewish descendant is very significant in the novel. More than a parody of the many versions for Columbus's origins, he explains that this descent is important because the Jews were expelled from Spain exactly in 1492, the year Columbus traveled for the first time to America. In 1492 Spain, the myth of "Pure Blood" (*sangre pura*) expressed the desire to keep a "pure race," and Spanish people did not want their blood mixed with Muslim or Jewish blood. Therefore, as both tribal and Jewish, Vizenor's Columbus is doubly marginal.

The myth of "Pure Blood" is a very traditional type of identification, associated to a racist concept of nation. However, the modern world introduces a *rational* idea of kinship: "my brothers and sisters are those who share my values and principles" (Krupat 58). According to Krupat,

since Vizenor's position is to keep things open by refusing to resolve contradictions, the politics of his novel must remain ambivalent, as well as the definition of identity in Point Assinika. Therefore, he defines tribal identity both in national *and* rational terms.

The trickster heirs cannot deny that blood counts in American society, which still takes into account blood quanta and repeats a colonialist behavior. Therefore, blood counts in the new nation, but according to the heirs' "ratio:" it is mixed blood that counts. Moreover, blood counts only when people share tribal values and the desire to heal the Chemical Society. The expression "hear stories in the blood" means that only those who value tribal ideas of healing with humor can have tribal blood.

The genetic signature in Point Assinika is not *pure*, it is hybrid. Since scientists have established the genetic signatures of most of the tribes in the country, anyone can have a genetic tribal identity by an injection of suitable genetic material and become a crossblood. "Germans, at last, could be genetic Sioux, and thousands of coastal blondes bored with being white could become shadow tribes of Hopi, or Chippewa, with gene therapies from Point Assinika" (162).

Ironically, Columbus's blood counts in the novel for tribal interests, since the heirs want to recover everything owned by their ancestor. Stone writes a letter to the President to remind him that King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella signed seven documents and granted Columbus a tenth of the gold, and other precious metals, spices, pearls, gems, and other merchandise obtained in commerce and free of all taxes. The trickster strategy is to expose Columbus's and American capitalist interests and ill-treatment of the Natives. Stone advises the president that, unless the government gives the legal heirs the unpaid tithe, they "shall annex, as satisfaction of the tithe, the United States of America" (160).

Krupat points that Vizenor's trickster discourse and humor achieve an ambivalent political significance, complicitous and critical at once. Moreover, he associates the idea of an ambivalent political position to Hutcheon's postmodern parody and Jameson's concept of "fantastic historiography." While Hutcheon affirms that there is political action in postmodern parody, Jameson states that postmodern fiction portrays symptoms of social and historical impotence, of the blocking of possibilities that leaves little option but the imaginary. Vizenor's use of the mythical figure of the trickster represents this movement to the imaginary, since the author affirms that "You can't have liberation if you're confined to discourses based on the real" (McCaffery and Marshall 303).

The political defense of ambivalence and a hybrid identity is part of Vizenor's trickster project. Western capitalist society cannot be destroyed, nor its impact on Native life can be neglected. Therefore, trickster resistance is appropriate because it is developed on the border between Western reality and the tribal literary power of imagination. Tricksters demonstrate the instability of contemporary life, and celebrate play as both a theoretical basis and a strategy of survival. In Point Assinika, Vizenor's defense of play is represented by the importance given to games of chance.

Gambling is free for those who come to the nation to be healed and become "tribal," and it is bingo that pays for local services. Vizenor makes clear that the capitalist interests of bingo will only be used for helping the Natives and marginalized people. In the first chapter, when the heirs still lived on the reservation, the narrator presents Columbus's ships Santa Maria, Niña and Pinta as respectively the "Santa Maria Casino," a restaurant, and a tax free market. This ironic appropriation of the ships both reinforces Hulme's argument that Columbus's search for gold evinced the capitalist intentions of his enterprise and allows his heirs to use Columbus's legacy for tribal interests.

In an interview, Vizenor shows his interest in detecting the impact bingo is having on the tribal experience of life – both its positive and negative consequences. Moreover, he relates the process of trickster storytelling to chance, highlighting the importance of playing in his literature. Games of chance are essential in Point Assinika, since they "heal the wounded and lonesome" (124). Therefore, although the Santa Maria Casino sinks in a storm as Columbus's ship did, play cannot stop in the novel: the heirs of Columbus survive and create a new casino in Point Assinika, the "Felipa Flowers Casino."

In fact, *The Heirs of Columbus* is a game between the trickster heirs and the evil forces which perpetuate colonialism. In "On Thin Ice You Might as Well Dance", Vizenor affirms that tricksters "*liberate* themselves through the process of existential play and language" (303). In this novel, the tricksters' strategy in the game is to liberate themselves through the play with language and colonialism. In several parts of the novel, the heirs confront evil forces, which represent colonialism in their attempt to destroy Native culture. The first one is Doric Michéd, who is a member of the Brotherhood of American Explorers and keeps Columbus's remains. In the last chapter, colonialism is represented by the cannibal windigoo, a Native evil figure with whom the heirs have to play the moccasin game. When they recover Columbus's remains from the Brotherhood of American Explorers and go to court to defend their rights, they win the game and defeat the American law system thanks to the trickster power of imagination and to the trickery of assuming the role of Columbus's descendants. Felipa's death is a kind of defeat, but the heirs are victorious in the end of the novel because they defeat the windigoo in the moccasin game.

The last scene in *The Heirs of Columbus* emphasizes the heirs' victory, which confirms that resisting colonization by retelling history through a trickster discourse can be a successful strategy. Almost Browne resurrects important figures in his laser show in the end of the novel, all of them considered tricksters and crossbloods: Jesus Christ, Christopher Columbus, Felipa Flowers and Pocahontas. Moreover, Almost resurrects leaders who are references in the history of Native resistance in the United States and Canada, as Louis Riel[2]. In fact, Vizenor introduces these Native figures of resistance early in the novel. One strategy is to present characters who are their descendants, such as the private investigator Chaine Louis Riel.

In spite of the fact that some resistance occurs as a result of the heirs' hybrid and trickster discourse, it is the end of the novel that exposes the limits of a Native resistance based on playing with the colonizer. Although the last sentence in the novel represents a happy end, since "The children danced on the marina, and their wounds were healed once more in a moccasin game with demons"(183), the windigoo reminds the heirs that "The game never ends"(183), which points to the instability of the heirs' victory when play is the strategy of resistance.

In the moccasin game, the windigoo has to find out which moccasin has the marked coin that bears the image of Christopher Columbus. If he wins, he takes the children who are at Point Assinika, and this means the heirs' defeat. Doric Michéd is mentioned several times in the novel as akin to the windigoo, which confirms the cannibal is the evil force of imperialism and capitalism in the novel. The irony is that it is the character associated with the colonizer that is the "cannibal" in the novel, and not the Native, as Columbus describes in his *Journal*.

The tricksters' strategy to defeat the windigoo is to place a dose of the war herb, which could destroy the world, in a pouch under the moccasin with the marked coin. The heirs win by convincing the windigoo to give up, since the war herb would end the tribe, the heirs, the children and the nation. In other words, it would end the world he is so eager to devour. The windigoo's dependence on the heirs is confirmed by Stone's question to the windigoo: "'Who would you be without the heirs and the children to menace?'" (182).

When Stone affirms that "even a demon needs humans" (182), he not only reaffirms the windigoo's statement that the game never ends, but also demonstrates that, in the ambivalent logic of the game, the two participants depend on each other. In other words, in the imperialist game the colonizer only affirms his existence by the presence of the colonized he menaces. The colonizer needs the colonized to keep the exploratory capitalist game and "devour" him, as the windigoo wants to devour the heirs.

The colonized, on the other hand, also needs the colonizer to keep the game in *The Heirs of Columbus*, and victory is only temporary, because the windigoo can return any time for another moccasin game. The problem of the instability of play is that there will always be the possibility of losing, specially

[2] Louis Riel was a very important leader of the Métis who led resistance against Eastern exploitation of the Canadian prairies. He was executed "for treason" by the central government in 1885.

when playing with such powerful forces as imperialism and capitalism.

Critics such as Diana Brydon, Edward Said, and Peter Hulme are aware of the dangers of playing with history and colonialism. In "The White Innuit Speaks: Contamination as Literary Strategy," Brydon explores the differences between postmodernism and postcolonialism, and suggests that postmodernist devices can serve postcolonial ends. She shows that postmodern fiction takes liberties when retelling the facts of history much more freely than does postcolonial fiction. For her, postcolonial resistance is possible when, while a text celebrates the contamination of colonizer and colonized discourses, it does not hesitate "to suggest that some interpretations carry greater validity than others: lies may be distinguished from truths; false values from valid ones" (201). In other words, even recognizing that there is no single truth, the text *desires* to be true when retelling history.

The discussion about how postmodernism and deconstruction can contribute to postcolonial resistance is very appropriate to the analysis of *The Heirs of Columbus*. Vizenor uses postmodernist and deconstructionist devices in the novel, and hybridity as postcolonial resistance reaffirms those devices. However, he prefers to end the novel very optimistically, with an image of hope. Krupat affirms that "Vizenor's postmodernism can serve as an antagonist to Western postmodernism rather than an ally" (68). According to him, Vizenor's sensitivity to human suffering and the human desire to act, as confirmed in the Sartrean epigraph to *The Heirs of Columbus*, makes his postmodernism far less ambiguous than anything possible in the more usual postmodernisms of Europe and America.

Brydon's text complements Krupat's conclusion. Vizenor's "less ambiguous" end to *The Heirs of Columbus* confirms Brydon's idea that it is important to take a position in order to have postcolonial resistance. Moreover, the epigraph from Sartre's "What is Literature?," which states that "we want it [literature] to be at the same time an act; we want it to be explicitly conceived as a weapon in the struggle that men wage against evil," indicates that Vizenor is aware of the necessity to be *against* colonialism when resisting it. However, the trickster play is predominant in the novel.

Finally, if a position *against* colonialism is necessary for postcolonial resistance, then the trickster ambiguous play can be a dangerous strategy. Nevertheless, the trickster play is successful in *The Heirs of Columbus*, and just in the end of the novel we can identify some closure and a position taken, when the heirs defeat the windigoo and install a healing *and* hybrid society. Vizenor's strategy is, then, to conciliate the trickster play with postcolonial resistance, and *The Heirs of Columbus* shows that tricksters can resist and transform society, although their victory is transitory, for the play with colonialism and capitalism never ends.

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