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## Head Water: An Interview with Gerald Vizenor

Gerald Vizenor

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Tom Marshall

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# CHICAGO REVIEW

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Larry McCaffery and Tom Marshall

## Head Water: An Interview with Gerald Vizenor

*As Gerald Vizenor explains in the following interview, the act of going away has allowed him to return home richer as an individual and as a writer. Asia has been especially important in this regard: it was in Japan just after the Korean War that Vizenor experienced his first major literary discovery—haiku. Then, over twenty years later, after having published numerous books of poetry (including several books of haiku) and journalism, a year teaching in Tianjin, China resulted in Vizenor's second novel, Griever: An American Monkey King in China.*

*We talked with Gerald Vizenor in his office at UC-Berkeley in early January 1992, just a few months after the publication of The Heirs of Columbus, a work which, appearing as it did in the face of the quincentennial, announced in no uncertain terms, "I'm not a victim of Columbus." For a mixed-blood Native American, that was quite an assertion. Looking at his own life and that around him, Vizenor continues re-shaping it, joined by the trickster who assists him in remembering "how to turn pain and horror into humor."*

**Larry McCaffery:** In your novel, *The Heirs of Columbus*, you describe Nanabozho, the first trickster and the brother of a stone. Wasn't the Chinese Monkey King also born from a stone?

**Gerald Vizenor:** Indeed he was. In fact, you may remember that in *Griever* I specifically mentioned that the Monkey King, the first version of the Chinese trickster, was born from a stone. I was trying to show how the beginning of life comes from something substantial, like a rock. *Dead Voices* actually opens with the trickster story and goes on for

some time about this. You have the trickster brother of the stone that can't move any more, so trickster has to come back all the time and tell him what he has been doing. Eventually he gets more or less pissed off and wants to do his brother in. So he says to the stone, I'm getting sick of this! I mean, I hit you, I try to break you, but I can't do it. How can I kill you? The stone replies, that's easy—just heat me up and then throw cold water on me; I'll break into a thousand pieces. Well, the brother does that and, sure enough, in the early tellings, the trickster-stone bursts into millions of pieces and covers the earth—and today every stone from anywhere on this world is metaphorically from that first break-up of the trickster. So the character in *Dead Voices* collects stones, which represent the metaphors of the stories. They fit the stories, allow her to tell and imagine stories, and give her presence and existence in a story. That's everywhere, always.

**LM:** Had you already researched the Chinese version of the trickster—that is, the Monkey King—before you went to China? I'm interested, for example, in what connections and differences you found in the presentations of the Chinese and Native American versions of the trickster. It's certainly significant that this figure appears in both cultural stories.

**GV:** I studied Chinese and Japanese literature in graduate school. I read Arthur Waley's translation of the Monkey King. I have to say, though, that the way it was presented in class as a cultural document made it difficult for me to relate this stuff to my own world. I make this very same argument today about the way tribal stories are represented by anthropologists. The Monkey King that I studied in graduate school didn't connect with me as a trickster until I arrived in China. Up until then it was just this cultural document to me, a folk story.

**LM:** Obviously, then, learning more about this Chinese Monkey King-Trickster figure wasn't specifically involved in your trip to China

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**GV:** Not at all. I went because it was a chance. I gave up my tenured position at the University of Minnesota. Then this position in China was open. I had some interests in writing a few situational journalistic pieces about my experiences there for a newspaper. I'd just have to see what would come of this. Maybe nothing would, but depending on what happened, I thought I might be able to do one of these journalistic

pieces a month—not travel stuff or magazine writing, but if something interesting was happening, I knew I could make a story out of it.

**Tom Marshall:** Something obviously happened over there to change your mind, because you didn't appear to do anything like that.

**GV:** No. What happened instead was that in the fall, a month into teaching over there, I was invited to see a production of some of the scenes from the Monkey King opera. That experience changed everything for me. The theater was overflowing with Chinese, of course, and at first I was overwhelmed by the audience—not simply because the place was so jammed but because the audience was dynamic, so completely engaged in the production even though there's no applause. I'm sure everyone in the audience must have changed seats at least twice, maybe more (we, of course, were the only people in the whole place who stayed in the same seats!); people would go out to the lobby to gossip, come back in when their favorite scene was about to be performed, and then rush right up to the stage. Then they'd leave again, and nobody would applaud. At first I was distracted by this rich and powerful dynamic between what was happening on the stage and the audience—and also by the smell of garlic and all these other good things. Of course, what's going on is also revolutionary, but not in this case revisionist or social realism, the way most theatrical productions were in China. In other words, this Monkey King material hadn't been converted to serve the state. The revolutionary state accepted these not as bourgeois spiritual pollution, but as folk culture, original literature that represented the Chinese consciousness. They accepted it for what it was because it was in their soul—and the soul in this case was not dangerous to the Communist Party. This was on-the-street stuff, a bit like puppet theater, not an elitist-Communist Party performance. So there it is. This probably sounds naive on my part, but it's true. And these wonderful distractions with the audience—I started paying attention to the play, and of course it was only then that I began to recognize all the stuff I had read about the Monkey King. Then, in one of those occasional strokes of insight you get, I suddenly saw the trickster figure. When I saw this stuff performed in this other context, there it was, suddenly alive, and I was thrilled. I knew immediately that I had a book. I didn't know what it was going to be exactly, but I knew I had a book somewhere. When I got back, I still didn't have a book, although I did have a powerful theme—the idea that the only figure in a story who could confront the oppressive bureaucracy and contradic-

tions existing in the People's Republic of China would have to be a mind monkey or trickster. The trickster Griever bashed at habits and rules in an established historical context.

**LM:** You've recently presented a number of discussions concerning the "postmodern" features of Native American literature. Interestingly enough, your analysis runs somewhat along the same lines as what Japanologist Maseo Miyoshi has said about very early literature in Japan—namely, that the Japanese literature exhibits many of the stylistic tendencies associated with postmodernism long before even "modernism" came along in the West. Obviously a lot of issues related to this topic come down mainly to a matter of definition and perspective—the problem being that in the West we always wish to see artistic "evolution" and development in terms of our own cultural paradigms and history.

**GV:** I can see the angle you're taking there, as well as what Miyoshi is driving at. It's closely connected to my argument that Native American storytellers were the first postmodernists. Making that assertion stick is tricky because of course this implies you could have a narrative tradition that's postmodern before it's ever gone through a "modern" phase. Premodern postmodernist.

**LM:** What's the theoretical basis of your claim for Native American literature as a postmodernist form? Or in making these claims, are you mainly just adopting the trickster position of playing with terms to reveal their limitations?

**GV:** First of all, I don't approach this topic theoretically because that would mean I'd have to carry back a formula for discovery. Instead I use the idea of postmodern *conditions*, which is Lyotard's notion. So I don't impose a theory—in fact, I'm very careful about not doing this because I am arguing against that.

**TM:** How would the "conditions" you're referring to here relate to Native American Writing?

**GV:** The conditions are that, first, no story is the same. The conditions are postmodern because of their connection to oral expression which is usually a kind of a free-floating signifier or a collection of signifiers, depending on who's present. The meaning of such stories that are orally

presented depends on a number of interesting, lively, immediate, temporal, and dangerous, dangerous natural conditions.

**LM:** What do you mean here by "dangerous"? A linguistic or conventional danger—the danger of a speaker upsetting the expectations?

**GV:** Something like that. Dangerous not specifically in the sense of life-threatening but dangerous in nature and *in language*. Telling a story is as "dangerous" as hunting—dangerous because your life depends on seeing and catching something. It's dangerous because it's an encounter with the unknown—something generally understood, but specifically unknown that may come together, alive or present in the telling or the hunting. To hunt, to tell stories, to write is dangerous. It's also survivance.

**TM:** I take it that "survivance" is an invented word that has additional meanings other than its French equivalence of "survival"?

**GV:** Yes. I wanted a term that would have a broader meaning than survival—that is, as a conditional experience rather than a mere response to domination or victimization. "Survivance" is not just carrying this burden and surviving—showing that I'm a survivor of victimization, for example—but also inventing a world view. It's an attitude of play—play in a very serious sense. Survivance is the end of domination in literature. It's also a new kind of existentialism, a source of identity—not the French atheistic existentialism but tribal existentialism or spiritual existentialism (I'm a little hesitant using the word "spiritual" here because I have to qualify it too much, whereas saying "tribal" leaves it open). The discovery of self through action, through being present, is the part of existentialism I borrow from Jean-Paul Sartre, but when I add to this the dream, the presence of previous experience, I get more mystical than Sartre and the others ever allowed. I argue that life is a chance, a story is a chance. That I am here is a chance. This interview is a dangerous, chance survivance. The advantages to survivance are that it provides a way to accept this condition, reverse what's been imposed upon us—and play with that!