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DECENTERING THE CENTRE: A DECONSTRUCTIVE STUDY OF THE HEIRS OF COLUMBUS

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Abstract

This paper explores the deconstructive elements through historiographic metafiction in Gerald Vizenor's novel *The Heirs of Columbus*. Vizenor uses a trickster discourse and sheds light on colonial history of American Indians. He highlights the power structures in relation to the other subjects in *The Heirs of Columbus*. The power structures imposed many unjust tasks on the "other" subjugated subjects to maintain power. The novel narrates the history of the subaltern class of society, thus decenters the metanarratives of overriding official documented history.

Introduction

The Heirs of Columbus rewrites the history of the Native Americans to highlight the significance of the American Indian culture and language. Vizenor redefines the role of the Native Americans in postmodern culture through postmodern historiographic narrative technique. The main story of the novel revolves around Christopher Columbus, a descendent of Mayans, and his ancestral memories (stories in blood) that call him to his homeland in Americas. During his visit to America, an Indian American healer named Samana takes him to bed and falls pregnant by him. The heirs mentioned in the title are offspring of Columbus and Samana who create a wonderful tribal nation. The heirs attempt to bring home the remains of Pocahontas and Columbus to rebury and verify their genetic relation to Columbus. Vizenor narrates the history of colonization in the trickster mode and deconstructs the Eurocentric myths. *The Heirs of Columbus* highlights the subjugation of the native subjects through self-reflexive metanarrative technique. Vizenor mingles the historical facts with fiction in a subversive way to redefine the American Indian identity.

Parodic Rewriting in *The Heirs of Columbus*

The Heirs of Columbus inverts the official history through a parodic twist by reimagining Christopher Columbus's arrival in America and shows him a descendant of Sephardic Jews and Mayans. Columbus's character is decentered in *The Heirs of Columbus* on his five hundredth anniversary of discovery of American continent. The history of

Christopher Columbus's invasion is narrated in the first three chapters of "Blue Moccasins". The fourth chapter turns the focus of history from Christopher Columbus to his heirs, that is, from the colonizer to the colonized. The main focus is on the heirs of Christopher Columbus whose strategies push American Indians to fight for their basic rights in the Euro American society. History as a process chooses incidents and constructs narratives by foregrounding one specific event and repressing others. The idea that history represents the true picture of the past and is objective in nature is deconstructed in Vizenor's narration as he reverts the events of history and raises multiple voices. Each voice in Vizenor's narration is given significance in the same manner. The multiple voices reinforce the fact that there is no specific "center" in the narration rather "center" revolves around the incidents. Vizenor's narration recreates the history and values the power, knowledge, culture, traditions and potential of the Native Americans. Vizenor provides a hybrid history of contemporary stories, tribal myths, colonialist histories which construct a parody by placing both fiction and history in simulacrum. In his interview with Coltelli, Vizenor comments about his historical sources:

I do work into everything I write so-called historical events, and I say so-called because some of the historical events would be obtained from either Indian writers or from Indian storytellers and other events are from non-Indian historians, so that they would be either, in the worst example, colonial, and probably the best example would be the methodological histories (*Winged Words* 156).

Vizenor follows Derridean theory for deconstructing Columbian narratives in *The Heirs of Columbus* and the two main aspects are trace and difference:

Difference is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be "present," appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already let itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified present (Derrida 142-43).

The character of Columbus depicted in *The Heirs of Columbus* is not the historically constructed one. Vizenor provides different constructions of Columbus by heirs in his narration. Columbus is the signifier for colonial ideologies. Vizenor's Columbus gives insights into the history through Derridean difference and trace. In *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor describes the role of trace as a strategy to survive:

The post Indian turns in literature, the later indication of new narratives, are an invitation to the closure of dominance in the ruins. The invitation uncovers traces of tribal survivance, trickster hermeneutics, and the reminiscence of intransitive shadows. The traces are shadows, shadows, shadows, and the natural reach of shadows, memories, and visions in heard stories (63).

The presentation of the colonial history through the trickster discourse enables the reader to perceive the trace itself in the creation of Columbus. According to the official account of history, Columbus discovered the American land which is ironically subverted by Vizenor. According to him, Columbus was not a foreigner but had affiliation with the land: Columbus was a bad shadow, tired and broken, because he lost most of his body parts on the way, so the old shamans heated some stones and put him back together again," croaked Truman. "Harm the water shaman, said he dreamed a new belly for the explorer, and shin,

the bone shaman, called in a new leg from the underworld ,and he got an eye from the sparrow woman, so you might say that we created this great explorer from our own stone at the tavern” (19).

Vizenor deconstructs the image of European Columbus and makes him the one who is healed by the natives through the trickster discourse. Columbus’s trickster heirs are shape-shifters and boundary crossers as they stay on the edge of the border between tribal and western worlds and reject any univocal state or terminal creeds. Their trickster nation also stays on an ambiguous point between Point Assinika, the border between Canada and United States of America. Hyde supports the boundary position of the heirs in his *Trickster Makes this World* (7).The words **bad shadow** and **lost and broken** are used ironically to deform the image of great explorer. Vizenor parodies historical figure of Columbus in an ironic mode as to him Columbus was not a great explorer who discovered the American continent but a **bad shadow** who is **lost and broken** and healed by the healing power of the Native Americans. The main focus is given to the Native American healing powers which reaffirm the superiority of the native tradition culture and belief system.

The excerpt subverts the European version of the historical discourse and presents history from another angle. The parodied intertext of history destabilizes the presupposition as, according to the European historical discourse, Columbus was considered a brave strong man who possessed heroic qualities while Vizenor shows another side of the great explorer. According to the trickster heir Truman, “he lost most of his body parts on the way, so the old shamans heated some stones and put him back together again”. Through this intertextual version of history, Vizenor depicts the historical superiority of the native culture which healed the wounded **broken, lost** and **bad shadow** of Christopher Columbus. The quoted excerpt exhibits the mental representations of the subject relations of the suppressor and the suppressed. The heirs claimed to create Columbus through their powers “so you might say that we created this great explorer from our own stone at the tavern”. The Native Americans resist the Euro American culture and history and narrate their own stories which make them superior to the suppressor. Truman’s claim “that we created this great explorer” elucidates the ironic strategy of Vizenor through which he reregulates the readers by introducing a counter discourse to the power structures.

The Heirs of Columbus as an intertextual parodied discourse restates the official discourse by writing it differently. The heirs of Columbus remember their stories in blood at Stone Tavern about the encounter of the colonizer (Columbus) and the colonized (native). In the chapter “Storm Puppets”, the history of Christopher Columbus’s voyage is revised by the heirs .The nine heirs mentioned in the narration have different powers such as Bin Columbus hears the stories of the history of Columbus and his voyages to America in a letter which was found in the sea in the remains of the sailor. This chapter is a parodied text of the *journal* and book *The life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus* about Columbus. Vizenor fills the gaps in the official history in *The Heirs of Columbus* in a humorous way. He uses the official history to authenticate the claim that Columbus is a Mayan descendent and comes back to his origin, that is, Americas . The first chapter begins with Columbus’s comments about the native version of history:

Christopher Columbus saw a blue light in the west, but “it was an uncertain thing”, he wrote in his journal to the crown, “that I did not feel it was adequate proof of land.” . . . Since then, the explorer has become a trickster healer in the stories told by his tribal heirs at the headwaters of the great river. The admiral of the ocean sea ,confirmed in the name

of Curia and crown, was an obscure cross blood who bore the tribal signature of survivance and ascended the culture of death in the old world. He landed at dawn with no missionaries or naturalists and heard the thunder of shamans in the coral and the stone. “No sooner had we concluded the formalities of taking possession of the island then people began to come to the beach” he wrote in his journal on October 12, 1492, at Samana cay (3).

In this part of the story, Vizenor highlights Columbus’s arrival in the Americas with a parodic turn. His arrival in the native land “ascended the culture of death in the old world”. Columbus’s steps brought death and sorrows to the lives of the Native Americans as they were subjugated by the European invaders. Vizenor parodied history of Columbus’s voyage to the American land is authenticated by the quotes he states from Columbus’s journal. The retelling of history with a blend of fiction shows Columbus a tribal “obscure cross blood who bore the tribal signature of survivance”. According to Vizenor, survivance is “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories”(1). Survivance denotes both survival and resistance to make presence visible in the mainstream Euro-American discourses. Vizenor uses this term to revive the native traditions, stories and identities.

Vizenor changes the tragedy of suffering and invasion into a comedy with the intertexts of history in a humorous mode. The quoted passage reimagines the moment of discovery and challenges the presupposed historical accounts. The quote *An obscure cross blood* is an ironical representation of Columbus as it shows the Admiral of the ocean sea as a Native American. Columbus’s figure gets healed through the stories in blood, as Vizenor states “Since then, the explorer has become a trickster healer in the stories”. On the one hand, the narration signifies the parodied story of the encounter with the colonizers and, on the other hand, it represents native resistance. Through the healing power of stories, the heirs come out of the overriding history of culture and resist the discourse of power. Vizenor resists the imposed identity and deconstructs the presuppositions of the official history.

The Heirs of Columbus attempts to put an end to colonization through the stories in blood. The quoted excerpt highlights the schemata of the colonizers. When Columbus saw the lights of America, he decided to occupy the place as he wrote in journal on October 12, 1492 “no sooner had we concluded the formalities of taking possession of the island then people began to come to the beach”. On the other hand, the same event is rewritten through the marginal perspective which states Columbus as one of the tribal healers who came back home. “He landed at dawn with no missionaries or naturalists and heard the thunder of shamans in the coral and the stone”. Columbus could hear “the thunder of shamans in the coral and stone” because he was one of them and came back to his origin. Vizenor shows the larger scale structure in the quoted excerpt as it represents the schemata of both the colonizer and the colonized.

In *The Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor rewrites the official history of the admiral of Ocean Sea’s family. He exhibits information about Columbus, the son of Domenico Colombo Sussanna di Fontanarossa and describes his physical appearance from *The Life of the Admiral*. In a parodic mode, Vizenor subverts the official history and adds some comic references regarding Columbus’s genitals:

Columbus could have been remembered as the unravished 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 cubbed 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 Valladolid, Spain, on May 20, 1506, and was first buried in San Francisco de la Santa Maria de la Antigua (31-38). In this excerpt, Vizenor associates the possession of motherland by the colonizer with the possession of a woman by man for sensual pleasure. He misbalances the binary oppositions between master and slave, civilized and uncivilized and good and bad. Columbus is not only shown as an evil character but a mixed blood native too as Vizenor states "He died a renounced slave to the monarchs in Valladolid, Spain". By associating the word *slave* with the Admiral of Ocean Sea, Vizenor destabilizes the colonial discourse which regards Columbus a great explorer and adventurer. Columbus's cursed disease was healed by the tribal hand talker Samana. Vizenor restates history by talking about Columbus's "burdensome penis that once was presented as comic in ancient dramas". A superior central position is given to the native character Samana as she liberates Columbus from a cursed disease and plays a significant role in decentering the center by pushing Columbus to the margins.

The Heirs of Columbus brings about significant changes in history and enables the American Indians to liberate themselves from unjust dichotomy. Through the humorous trickster discourse, Vizenor decomposes the presupposed accounts of history. In one of his interviews with Laura Coltelli, he says, "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, thus, rewrites the story of Columbus by making him appear someone else other than the Admiral of Ocean Sea. By showing Columbus's sexual disease, Vizenor subverts the official history about Christopher Columbus and destabilizes reader's notion about Christopher Columbus.

Vizenor constructs a heterogeneous space, buries the history of victims and replaces it with a balanced self-conscious environment. To escape the colossal consequences of colonialism one has to forget the history and deconstruct the assumption that history is real or a true representation. The quoted excerpt focuses on Columbus as a slave to the monarchs and a native healer: "he avouched his mission to the monarchs, and at the same time he carried the signature of survivance, the unrevealed stories in his blood". On the one hand, he serves the colonizers as a slave and, on the other hand, he possesses the attributes of a native. By portraying Columbus this way, Vizenor deconstructs the binary relations and shows Columbus a native.

The Heirs of Columbus does not rewrite a serious history of Columbus rather it rejects the historical burden which was put on the native populations by the western colonial discourse of history. According to Vizenor, change is necessary for survival as he states in his interview with Coltelli:

If a culture is to live, it changes, it always changes. If a people live, they imagine themselves always and in a new sense. And here we are in the city, and people are still trying to figure out what was the past. Well, there isn't any past, we're it, and I am, and I'm on the intersection; and I'm finding my way through traffic and I'm going to tell stories about it . . . stories are comic acts of survival (*Winged Words* 164).

The destructive history of colonization is replaced by the stories which are "comic acts of survival". The retelling of Columbus in the tribal mode provides a freedom to the native population from the western subjugation. *The Heirs of Columbus*, hence, becomes a source of liberation for the colonized through the subversion of Columbian heritage and western

discourses of power. The heirs take the readers from the traditional history to another version of history and declare Columbus as one of the descendants of Mayans:

“Columbus was Mayan,” Said Stone . . . “The Maya brought civilization to the savages of the old world and the rest is natural” said Stone. “Columbus escaped from the culture of death and carried our tribal genes back to the new world, back to the great river, he was an adventurer in our blood and he returned to his homeland”

“He sought gold and tribal women “said Stone.

So what did he find”?

“He found his homeland at the headwaters” (9-10).

Vizenor turns the Admiral of Ocean Sea into Jewish Mayan and transforms the tragedy related to colonization into a comedy through the use of trickster discourse. He shows that natives are the original inhabitants of the land. (qtd. in Liang 125). Vizenor dismantles the Western historical narratives and claims *Columbus was Mayan* and, at the same time, *Mayan brought civilization to the old world*. In the quoted passage, Vizenor’s first argument is to show Christopher Columbus a Mayan by incorporating trickster discourse in the text and, further, highlights the superiority of Mayan civilization in contrast to the Western civilization. Columbus contains the *signature of survivance and stories in blood* which were activated by the tribal handtalker Samana. Vizenor constructs a hybrid text to reregulate the behaviors of readers as producers of text.

The quoted excerpt turns the official history of Christopher Columbus upside down and breaks the presupposed notion of “Great explorer Columbus” which was constructed through the official documents of history. Vizenor’s Columbus is a different Columbus with Jewish Mayan ancestry who comes back home to his origin with the *signature of survivance and stories in his blood* as Stone claims, “Columbus escaped from the culture of death and carried our tribal genes back to the new world, back to the great river, he was an adventurer in our blood and he returned to his homeland”. The tribal characters in the novel are depicted as the heirs of Columbus and Samana, the tribal handtalker who healed Columbus through intercourse, activates the healing powers of stories in his blood. Through the intertextual counter discourse, Vizenor dismantles the Western discourse and raises multiple marginal voices.

Vizenor ironically highlights the mental representations of both power and subordinate and with a blend of fiction transforms the discourse of power. In the quoted excerpt on the one hand he shows Columbus a Jewish Mayan who came home to his origin and on the other hand his lust for power and women is highlighted which is purely a colonial attribute. The term *He sought gold and tribal women* illuminates the greedy nature of the colonizers who brought death and displacement to the native populations for the sake of materialistic gains.

Conclusion

Vizenor unveils the covetous nature of Christopher Columbus, a representative of the colonizers, and, at the same time, he draws attention to another point by saying *he found his homeland at the headwaters*. Thus, he blends fact and fiction and destabilizes the official documented history for native survivance.

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