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COMMUNICATING BETWEEN ORAL AND WRITTEN IN GERALD VIZENOR'S *HIROSHIMA BUGI: ATOMU 57*

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The paper discusses Gerald Vizenor's 2003 novel *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* within the context of, what the writer calls, a *kabuki* novel, which is a meditative communication between the tribal oral tradition and the contemporary written narrative in post-World War II Japan and Native American community of the White Earth Reservation. Through an analysis of Vizenor's rule-breaking style of writing that the writer describes as a visual experience, the paper will explore his *Hiroshima* as the dialogue between contradictions written in the oral tradition of indigenous peoples of the United States and Japan, striving to embody the essence of oral culture in the written narrative in order to present a more complex vision of reality than those forms of writing generally recognized as factual.

The aim of this paper is to focus on a dynamic performance on nuclear devastation in an unordinary language game and a communication between oral and written in Vizenor's imaginative reformulation of Hiroshima past by nativizing a contemporary social situation that moves the reader beyond the words to the cryptic realm of experience and experimental reality.

Key words: *an oral culture, a written narrative, an unordinary language game, Gerald Vizenor, Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57, a kabuki novel, survivance, a trickster figure, indigenous people.*

1. Vizenor's Dialogue between Contradictions in *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57*

Gerald Vizenor's 2003 *kabuki* novel *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* departs radically from traditional forms and techniques, challenging existing conventions, and communicating between oral and written in the cross-cultural link between the Ainu, the indigenous natives of the island of northern Japan, and the Anishinaabe, the Native American tribe to which the writer belongs. He is descended from what he calls "mixblood" or "crossblood" origins, primarily Swedish and Anishinaabe. His family and ancestors belong to what is now the White Earth Reservation in northern Minnesota. Therefore, Vizenor comes from a storytelling people, and he is even a member of the crane clan through his father. As a literary artist, he counts himself among original and experimental writers who tell a story in a different way, and also try to make use of Native

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oral experience, or any other Native experience, in an original literary way. His *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* is the dialogue between contradictions written in oral tradition of indigenous peoples of the United States and Japan, developing new consciousness of co-existence between them and colonial powers in a narrative estate of native 'survivance'. 'Survivance' is a word coined by Vizenor, meaning 'survival' and 'endurance'. Moreover, the term is used to describe existence of minority cultures through storytelling, ceremonies, and an active sense of presence over absence, victimry and nihility.

As Vizenor consistently identifies his work with the oral tradition, and describes his style of writing as a visual experience, his *Hiroshima* is a natural communication between myth and reality, or natural and supernatural world. Central to these mythic connections of his narrative is a trickster figure who or which mediates between man and nature, embodies contradictions and ambiguity, and makes a spiritual balance between the forces of good and evil through humor in the contemporary world. It is a language game and a figure, which Vizenor calls "a comic holotrope". In other words, the trickster is a chance or a figure of speech, which can manifest the creative force within individuals that allows them to break the rules, move beyond the boundaries, and liberate themselves. Vizenor thus writes to liberate and heal. Elvira Pulitano claims the same in her 2003 study *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*. She points out that Vizenor's main concern is the primary role of language, which is to set people free, as it is in the oral context. His *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* incorporates the oral into the written in the form of, what the writer calls, a *kabuki* novel. In the Japanese term of *kabuki*, which signifies the highly stylized dance-drama and theatre, Vizenor's *Hiroshima* is a meditative dance between the tribal oral tradition and the contemporary written narrative. Moreover, *kabuki* "is believed to derive from the verb *kabuku*, meaning 'to lean' or 'to be out of the ordinary'", and "can be interpreted as 'avant-garde' or 'bizarre' theatre."¹ In this context, *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* could be seen as a dynamic performance on nuclear devastation in an unordinary language game with infinite range of possibilities including satire, parody and travesty in the trickster narrative of the story of survivance. Thus, Vizenor's *kabuki* novel is a continuous play of "perfect memory" (Vizenor 2003: 36), linking post-World War Japan and

¹ Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabuki> (Last Accessed December 1, 2010)

Native American Community of the White Earth Reservation. In the oral tradition, the unnamed third person narrator says that the protagonist of the novel, "Ronin, by his presence in the ruins, created a ritual, a nuclear kabuki theater that teased and defied the preservation of peace." (Vizenor 2003: 36)

The novel offers two versions of the same story. The first account is given in the first person, the second in the third omniscient person, both establishing a literary dialogue or a trickster discourse wherein the two voices of the story fulfill one another. Both stories include stories within stories being themselves stories within stories, which is a technique that Vizenor calls "word cinemas". The meaning of the stories is based "upon a world view which presumes that everything in nature, be it tree, plant, animal, bird, stone, wind, or mountain, has a life of its own and can interact with humanity." (Vizenor 2003: 51-52) Kimberly M. Blaeser in her 1996 study *Writing in the Oral Tradition* about Gerald Vizenor indicates that this discourse comes about only through the engagement of the reader, who must take up the role of the trickster mediator. Vizenor thus communicates with the reader who is liberated from the text, but who brings *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* into being as an event in oral tradition. The reader as the listener of the story becomes involved into the dialogue of an *open text*, and through the power of intuition and imagination finds the truth in individual answers, alternatives and possibilities, all together resisting singularity. For Vizenor, stories are the truth, and facts are the end. Blaeser explains it telling that his method combines a narrative structure with a kind of writing Manina Jones calls "documentary collage", and adds:

Into the telling of history he brings imagination. He does more than record or catalogue facts; he tells an imaginative story in order to "relume" the past, to bring it to life... The storytelling, the narrative method, allows him to imbue the facts with suggestion, implication, and possibility with the shadows of history thus invoking a fuller truth. (Blaeser 1996: 86)

In cross-cultural dialogue of *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* between the Ainu and the Anishinaabe, Vizenor through the protagonist of the novel, Ronin Ainoko Browne, draws on native tradition and samurai to confront the moral burdens and passive notions of nuclear peace celebrated at the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima. He even creates a new calendar that starts with the first use of atomic bomb, Atomu One. His story is a practice of survivance in ceremony on nuclear devastation that strives toward an active sense of native presence in the

future, linking indigenous people of Japan and the United States, and moreover criticizing inability of the modern-day people to grasp fully presence or legacy of atomic deconstruction in Hiroshima. In Ronin's as in Vizenor's understanding, museums are embodiment of the disappearance of the real behind the image, what Jean Baudrillard calls the "simulacrum", and they capture past in simulation of dominance, as it is in the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima. In the last chapter of *Hiroshima*, the narrator tells the reader that the protagonist:

...has died many times over the manners and proprieties of an empire nation that would not embrace the *hafu* children of the occupation... Ronin is loyal to the *kami* spirits of thousands of children who died when the atomic bomb destroyed Hiroshima. He has resisted, countered, and accosted those who endorsed notions of fake peace, as you know, and he has obstructed museums in the name of war and peace... There were times when he seemed convinced that by shouts, encounters of the *kami* spirits, and trickery he could create stories of human dignity and survivance, rather than the dead letters of tradition, obedience to the emperor, and peace poses. (Vizenor 2003: 206)

1. Resisting Singularity in *Hiroshima*

Ronin says Hiroshima is his bugy dance, but it is also a shadow in native context. In Vizenor's conception, shadows are active memories of stories heard in silence. As they exist in oral tradition, they do not need a source. Vizenor tries to bring shadows into being with his writing in imagination of tribal experience. In *Hiroshima* he deconstructs notions of a lost past in order to construct an existence in "survival" and "endurance" in the present, and a vision of survivance for the future. Hence, dreams are here a source of reality. Every telling or re-telling of a story is a new story and a constant experimentation. Furthermore, linear time, monologic style, and coherent structure are abolished. There is a strong connection to oral expression, since the novel blends tradition with innovation. In this way, Vizenor confronts the difference between oral and written stories emphasizing the healing power of trickster consciousness. Blaeser, for example, says that Vizenor's writing in general clearly reflects the mythic tradition of tribal trickster narrative, but the writer applies it to contemporary conditions and links it with contemporary theory. His *Hiroshima* is a practice of survivance, and the critical interpretation of that literary practice is a theory of irony and native survivance. The novel is an aesthetic act of resistance to dominant cultural narratives, and continuance of stories with the

possibility that the story has life beyond the page. Likewise, Vizenor strives to embody the essence of oral culture in the written narrative in order to present a more complex vision of reality than those forms of writing generally recognized as factual. Through rule-breaking style, visual thinking, neologisms, employment of metaphor, and the trickster figure that plays on the edge of metaphor, he moves the reader beyond the words to the cryptic realm of experience and experimental reality. Thus, Vizenor's *Hiroshima* exposes the power of shadow silence of history, and sets the story in a physical and mythic space not as reality versus non-reality, but as interlaced elements that together create man's reality. The style of the novel deconstructs the classic narrative styles, including the one of history, autobiography, literary journalism, and other narratives; however it incorporates all of these into a new approach and a new understanding of the *kabuki* genre.

Ronin's story, given in a subjective first person narrative, embodies mystery and spiritual rhythm of traditional tribal songs, dream voices, ceremonies and visions in a touch with nature, reflecting the twist on natural experience that is almost transformation, as Vizenor describes it, and human consciousness derived from other living things, what the writer calls a "dreamscape". It is a transcendental moment of vision similar to dream or ceremonial trance. Ronin creates a dreamscape from dream songs in oral tradition. In Vizenor's conception, dream songs are events, and magical and spiritual flights through cosmic rhythms, tribal instincts, and memories, expressing the contrast of life and death, day and night, courage and fear, man and woman. As dream or imaginative experience, dream songs are mediators between the conscious and unconscious worlds of the people. On the one hand, Ronin puts himself in communication with natural and supernatural, facts and myth, and then with animals, birds, and other creatures, things, elements or conditions that stand outside intellectual and logical realms; on the other hand, he communicates directly with the reader, and incites his or her active reading with which Ronin as well as Vizenor believes we should approach historical story. At the beginning of the novel, he says:

The Atomic Bomb is my Rashomon.

Come closer to the stone, over here, out of the rain. You are the first person to visit me in the ruins. This is my unearthly haven in the

remains of the first nuclear war. Only the dead rush their stories under this dome.

The gate of ruins.

The rain, the moody rain, a reminder of that bright and vicious light that poisoned the marrow and forever burned the heart of our memories. Rain, rain, and the ominous stories of black rain. No one can ever be sure of the rain.

The park ravens break that inscrutable silence at the wispy end of a rainstorm. Listen, the shadows of dead children arise from the stone and shout back at the ravens. They mock each other, a parade of ghosts forever teased by the rain. (Vizenor 2003: 1)

Ronin continues his story in a dream song:

Sit here, near the ropes.

Twisted reeds?

My kabuki theater.

Raven sumo.

Kabuki of the ruins.

Fierce beauty.

Shadows of the dead.

Ghostly souvenirs.

Atomu war.

Curse of black rain.

Hiroshima my chance.

Kyoto preserved.

Twice by irony. (Vizenor 2003: 1)

Ronin's narrative bounds multiple traditions, such as traditions of writing and speaking, Native American and Japanese cultures, and contemporary society and tribal community. His voice is different from the one of the omniscient narrator in many ways, which is visually expressed through the print and font of both accounts; yet the third person narrative also creates multilayered account that is similar to Ronin's mode of writing. Moreover, they together bring the text in dialogue with one another. The first person narrative is written in the oral tradition. It looks like a dream word, a ceremony liberated from the page, paper and language, although it employs language in order to move beyond it. In contrast to this, the third person account looks like it is written on a typewriter, and visually gives an impression of writing in a coherent structure; however it is only on the surface. The omniscient narrator tells the same story as Ronin, the story about Ronin, but from different perspective, using other stories, parts of newspaper reports, interviews, books, essays, theories as well as Ronin's own story. In his last story, chapter or essay in form of a diary or even fictional memoirs, the narrator explains that Ronin's lover

Miko "mailed the three boxes of notes, scenes, and seven ledger books" (Vizenor 2003: 206) to him at the Hotel Manidoo, adding: "The actual manuscript was completed here, as you know, and published as *Hiroshima Bugi* by the University of Nebraska Press." (Vizenor 2003: 206) He persuades the reader that the story is real and factual, while Ronin finishes his tale in a metaphysical way as he says: "I am a crane, and you readers who want to know more about me must search in the clouds. Lafcadio Hearn is a crane on my wing. Many authors fly this way." (Vizenor 2003: 203)

Both stories are juxtaposed with each other, fulfilling one another and resisting singularity, but the reader is the one who makes the story in communication between oral and written narratives. To sum up, this unusual two-part form, both central to the contemporary Native narrative, is trickster inspired.

2. Conclusion

The survivance story of a Japanese-Anishinaabi orphan born during the American occupation, his return to Japan and his as well as Native veterans' "perfect memories" on nuclear devastation in Hiroshima, Vizenor builds on dreams, visions, open views, and belief that life is a continual transformation and changeable movement even into death, where the death does not necessarily mean the end, but also transformation. Therefore, he creates an imaginative reformulation of Hiroshima past by nativizing a contemporary social situation. His term "perfect memory" is ironic as it signifies the fact that memories change under the influence of subsequent experiences, both personal and global. Vizenor himself explains that perfect memory has an analogue in Anishinaabe culture, in which traditional naming practice reflects the transitory nature of socially constructed identity. He adds that names in tribal tradition distill memorable stories, and an even more memorable story leads to a new name and social identity. Since the native trickster has many names, Vizenor often orients his story about Hiroshima by inventive naming, metaphorical meanings and trickster signature. The trickster figure is simultaneously both central and marginal to his culture, and it is never simply a character, but a self-reconstructive power that can only be realized through the language and speech of an individual. Not surprisingly the protagonist of *Hiroshima Bugi*, has two names. His personal name, Ronin, literally means a "wave man", and it is by

definition used for a wandering samurai, or a traditional masterless warrior. He is a "hafu", hybrid or "mixedblood" orphan son of Okichi, a Japanese boogie-woogie dancer who is probably an Ainu from Hokkaido, and of Nightbraker, an Anshinaabe from the White Earth Reservation who served as an interpreter for General Douglas MacArthur during the first year of the American occupation in Japan. Ronin or a ronin resists boundaries and singularity in many ways. As a character that embodies the trickster figure, and then contradictions and ambiguity as well, Ronin mediates between supposed contradictory worlds of the spiritual or tribal and the real or modern existence. On the one hand, he is in a constant fight for balance between the opposite poles, and he himself interconnects aspects of both; on the other hand, Ronin upsets the balance of dominant contemporary culture criticizing its inability to recognize the tragic wisdom in the face of dominance. *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* illustrates the power of individuals that is the vital center of the native community, what Vizenor calls a "visionary sovereignty", and the importance of cultural exchange in the ongoing process of hybridity and cultural change, as Linda Lizut Helstern points out in her essay about theories of survivance by Gerald Vizenor and Simon Ortiz. Thus, Vizenor's story of survivance creates the perfect memory of Hiroshima communicating between oral and written in the boundless potential of discovery and re-discovery of reality in the continuance of old stories that will live anew in every generation.

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