

Shadows of Sovereignty: Gerald Vizenor and the Aestheticization of Indigenous Resistance

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Abstract

This essay critically examines the theoretical frameworks and literary strategies of Gerald Vizenor, revealing how his sophisticated postmodern approaches, while offering powerful tools for analyzing colonial representation, may risk transforming tribal sovereignty into aesthetic performance. Through close analysis of Vizenor's major works and key concepts—including survivance, shadow presence, crossblood identity, and trickster discourse—the study demonstrates how his theoretical interventions potentially undermine rather than enhance tribal sovereign power. The analysis traces how Vizenor's treatment of absence converts material erasure into narrative opportunity; his comedy of presence shifts resistance from political action to aesthetic play; his concept of survivance transforms material survival into storytelling performance; and his trickster discourse destabilizes the foundations of territorial sovereignty by privileging narrative ambiguity over legal and political certainty. Drawing on contemporary scholarship in Native American studies, his essay reveals how Vizenor's emphasis on narrative innovation, cultural hybridity, and virtual presence, though theoretically sophisticated, risks dissolving the categories through which tribal sovereignty is legally and politically maintained. Through examination of specific texts and theoretical concepts, this paper demonstrates how Vizenor's frame-

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works consistently privilege aesthetic transformation over material political power, potentially offering the hollow freedom to perform sovereignty while undermining the ability to exercise it. Furthermore, while Vizenor's theoretical sophistication offers valuable insights into colonial representation and provides powerful tools for literary analysis, its practical effect may be to suggest that tribal sovereignty can exist primarily through cultural performance rather than political authority—a transformation that demands scrutiny in ongoing struggles for Indigenous self-determination.

Keywords: Gerald Vizenor, tribal sovereignty, trickster, survivance, crossblood identity

Introduction

The intersection of literary innovation and political sovereignty in Native American literature finds its most provocative and contested expression in the works of Gerald Vizenor. As Kimberley Blaeser notes, “Vizenor’s writing, both critical and creative, has impacted the shape of Native American literature and the direction of Native American literary criticism perhaps more than that of any other Native writer” (*Writing in the Oral Tradition* 1). His theoretical innovations, particularly his concepts of “survivance,” “manifest manners,”¹ and “postindian identity,”² have fundamentally reshaped scholarly conversations around Native agency, authenticity, and anti-colonial critique. Vizenor’s influence extends far beyond the academy, with his successful advocacy for White Earth constitutional reform exemplifying how his ideas directly impact real-world struggles for Indigenous self-determination. Given his canonical status and formative impact on both creative and critical Native discourse, a rigorous examination of how his theoretical frameworks affect tribal sovereignty in practice becomes not merely academic exercise but urgent political necessity.³

This concern about real-world implications resonates with Craig Womack’s assertion that “criticism and theory, to my way of thinking, should do three things: express itself artfully, illuminate texts, and address conditions in the material world” (*Red on Red* 8). While Vizenor’s work certainly achieves the first

¹ Manifest manners, a term coined by Vizenor as a play on “Manifest Destiny,” refers to the ongoing practices and representations that perpetuate colonial dominance over Native peoples. In *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, Vizenor defines these as “the course of dominance, the racist notions and misnomer in archives and lexicons as authentic representations.” These manifest manners operate through what he terms “terminal creeds” fixed beliefs that impose static definitions upon Native identity and experience. Manifest manners represent not just historical colonialism but an ongoing process that must be actively resisted through what he calls “postindian warriors” who challenge these dominant narratives through new stories and forms of presence. For further reading on Manifest manners: Vizenor, Gerald. *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (1994).

² Postindian represents his critique of the constructed “Indian” identity and his vision for Native presence beyond colonial stereotypes. In *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor presents postindian warriors as those who challenge colonial narratives through new stories and presence. Through postindian consciousness, Native peoples assert their presence as dynamic, evolving cultures capable of adapting to and transforming contemporary contexts. For further reading on the concept of postindian: Vizenor’s *Manifest Manners* (1994); Blaeser’s *Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* (1996); Madsen’s *Understanding Gerald Vizenor* (2009).

³ Throughout this analysis, I distinguish between tribal sovereignty—the inherent right of Native nations to self-governance, including authority over membership, resources, and territory—and what I term material sovereignty—the concrete ability to exercise these rights through actual control over land, resources, and political institutions. This distinction is crucial for understanding how Vizenor’s work, despite its political intentions, may transform sovereignty from exercised authority into performed symbolism.

two objectives through its innovative theoretical frameworks and sophisticated textual analysis, the question remains whether it adequately addresses material conditions facing Native communities. As Arnold Krupat observes in *Red Matters*, the tension between aesthetic innovation and political efficacy represents a fundamental challenge in Native American literary criticism. Krupat identifies three critical perspectives—nationalist, indigenist, and cosmopolitan—each offering different approaches to sovereignty. Significantly, he warns that cosmopolitan approaches, while “offering powerful tools for analyzing colonial representation,” risk “transforming tribal sovereignty into aesthetic performance” (*Red Matters* 19). This warning proves particularly prescient when examining Vizenor’s work, which consistently privileges what Krupat terms “narrative performance over political action” (23). This privileging of Western theoretical sophistication over tribal-specific interpretive frameworks ultimately serves to “cut [. . .] off one’s self as a Native American writer from effective political action” (Cook-Lynn qtd. in Krupat 9).

The theoretical stakes of this debate become clear when considering how Vizenor’s approach differs fundamentally from other prominent Native writers. While celebrated writers like N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko employ modernist techniques to reclaim and revitalize tribal traditions—maintaining vital connections between aesthetic innovation and territorial sovereignty—Vizenor’s distinctly postmodern approach subverts the very categories and binaries through which Native identity has been constructed and constrained. Vizenor’s work, as James Mackay observes, “moves beyond simple binaries of traditional/modern to imagine new possibilities for Indigenous futurity” (209). However, this transcendence of categorical frameworks poses significant risks for tribal sovereignty. As Billy Stratton and Frances Washburn emphasize, “any group with a strong cultural foundation is more likely to survive adverse social, political, or historical circumstances. Furthermore, culture is often associated with ethnic identity in a general way, as it relates to American Indians, or in a specific way, as in a member of a specific tribe such as Cherokee, Hopi, or Seneca” (55). This emphasis on specific tribal identities directly challenges Vizenor’s universalist approach. As Audra Simpson argues, “political membership in an Indigenous nation . . . is a complex calculus of relationships, responsibilities, and recognition that exceeds the parameters of multicultural inclusion” (5). More critically, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson warns that “when we turn political resurgence into cultural resurgence, we run the risk of allowing the state to appropriate our political agenda under the guise of recognizing our cultural difference” (45). Thus, while offering creative possibilities, Vizenor’s approach risks converting tribal political authority into cultural performance,

ultimately facilitating what Glen Coulthard describes as “the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form [that] promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power” (3).

This essay argues that Vizenor’s sophisticated postmodern frameworks, while offering powerful tools for challenging colonial representation, become problematic when abstracted from their literary contexts and adopted as dominant theoretical models for tribal sovereignty. The concern lies not in aesthetic experimentation itself—which Indigenous writers should be free to pursue—but in the theoretical influence of Vizenor’s concepts when taken up as comprehensive frameworks for understanding Indigenous resistance. Through close analysis of his key concepts—survival, crossblood identity, and shadow presence—this study demonstrates how Vizenor’s theoretical interventions consistently privilege narrative performance over political action, converting concrete survival into storytelling performance and dissolving the legal and political boundaries essential to tribal self-determination. Because Vizenor’s theories have achieved such canonical status and widespread adoption in Native American studies, examining how they affect tribal sovereignty becomes not merely an academic exercise but urgent political necessity. The question is not whether his aesthetic innovations have literary value—they clearly do—but what happens to material sovereignty when his frameworks become the dominant modes through which Indigenous resistance is theorized and practiced. This critique finds support in recent scholarship on Anishinaabe storytelling practices. *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies* demonstrates that when Indigenous stories are analyzed through Western theoretical frameworks, they experience a fundamental loss of power. As Garrouette and Westcott argue, academic narratives that rely on “representational assumptions” transform stories from living beings that can “create and re-create the world” into mere “semiotic” objects that “ultimately bow to forces beyond themselves” (74). This transformation—from material force to aesthetic representation—characterizes Vizenor’s theoretical approach to survival and reveals the profound stakes of this analysis for contemporary Indigenous struggles.

The implications of this argument extend beyond literary criticism to how tribal sovereignty is conceived and exercised in the twenty-first century. While Vizenor’s theoretical frameworks offer powerful strategies for deconstructing colonial narratives, their practical effect may suggest that tribal sovereignty can exist primarily through cultural performance rather than political authority—a transformation that demands scrutiny in ongoing struggles for Indigenous self-determination. Before examining how Vizenor’s theoretical frameworks affect tribal sovereignty, it is necessary to acknowledge why his work has achieved such canonical status. By blending Anishinaabe oral traditions with postmodern

narrative techniques, Vizenor creates what Blaeser terms “trickster discourse”—a mode of writing that destabilizes colonial categories through its very form. However, influence and political efficacy are not synonymous. The question this essay pursues is: what happens to tribal sovereignty when Vizenor’s aesthetic frameworks become dominant modes for understanding Indigenous resistance?

Survivance and Storytelling: Transforming Political Authority into Narrative Performance

Vizenor’s concept of survivance reveals both the potential and limitations of his theoretical approach to Indigenous resistance. At the heart of Vizenor’s theoretical framework lies the concept of survivance, presenting his attempt to move beyond simple survival to capture Indigenous peoples’ active presence and resistance to colonial domination. Vizenor’s concept of survivance ostensibly emphasizes active Native presence and resistance. He defines it as “more than survival, more than endurance or mere response” (*Fugitive Poses* 15), suggesting a dynamic form of cultural persistence. However, the concept’s very appeal—its elevation of cultural expression and narrative innovation—reveals how it detaches from material political action. By making survivance “more than” survival and endurance, Vizenor paradoxically makes it less tangible, less grounded in the actual political struggles through which tribal nations maintain sovereignty. The question is not whether survivance offers valuable insights for literary analysis—it does—but whether its emphasis on narrative and cultural expression overshadows the material and political foundations that tribal sovereignty requires.

When Vizenor’s character Stone Columbus claims that stories function as “genes of survivance” (*Heirs* 32), Vizenor completes a problematic transformation: political resistance becomes biological metaphor, which then becomes narrative performance. This progression demonstrates how survivance, despite its radical potential, risks converting tangible struggle into aesthetic possibility. As Hans and Madsen observe in their recent analysis, “Vizenor’s notion of survivance, which originally highlighted the resistance and creative survival of Native people, has now come to be understood more broadly as a future-oriented concept of Indigenous continuity and creativity” (2). This evolution in how survivance has been understood reflects a crucial shift in emphasis. The initial conception centered active resistance within specific political contexts, grounding creative expression in material struggle. However, as the concept has been taken up in broader theoretical discourse, its political edge has been dulled. This shift from “resistance and creative survival” to “Indigenous continuity and creativity” suggests a

troubling move away from political struggle toward aesthetic expression, one that characterizes Vizenor's broader approach to Native opposition.

Vizenor's emphasis on narrative as the primary site of sovereignty raises crucial questions about political efficacy. Vizenor's concept of survivance challenges traditional narratives of Indigenous survival. By defining survivance as "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or survivable name" (*Manifest Manners* 7), he reframes Indigenous experience from passive endurance to dynamic cultural assertion. This definition suggests that survival transcends mere biological continuation, emphasizing active cultural regeneration and narrative resistance. However, the question remains whether Vizenor's "storier" maintains what King, Gubele, and Anderson identify as story's power to "change our reality" (3) or merely performs resistance aesthetically. By claiming survivance is "more than" survival and endurance, he paradoxically makes it less tangible, less grounded in actual political struggle. This emphasis on narrative as the primary site of sovereignty is underlined in Vizenor's recent work *Native Provenance: The Betrayal of Cultural Creativity* (2019), where he argues that "the native stories of survivance are the creases of transmotion and sovereignty" (11). The stress on "stories" as constituting "active presence" and as "the creases of transmotion and sovereignty" implies that narrative performance alone can substitute for material sovereignty. This framing suggests an even stronger emphasis on storytelling as the major mode of Indigenous self-determination, potentially superseding more concrete forms of political action.

This transformation manifests itself in *The Heirs of Columbus*, where storytelling replaces political action as the primary mode of resistance. When Stone Columbus declares that "Our stories heal, our stories are genes of survivance" (132), he reveals how thoroughly Vizenor has converted biological continuity into narrative performance. This genetic metaphor reveals three problematic shifts in Vizenor's thinking. First, by equating stories with genes, Vizenor biologizes narrative, suggesting that cultural transmission can replace actual kinship relationships that form the basis of tribal citizenship. Second, the emphasis on "healing" stories positions narrative as medical intervention, but offers no mechanism for addressing the material conditions that create trauma in the first place. Third, Stone's later assertion that "the signatures of tribal survivance are in the blood of the genome" (147) completes the conversion of political identity into scientific abstraction. Additionally, this metaphorical fusion of "stories" with "genes" demonstrates what Warrior terms "the reduction of material inheritance to narrative transmission" (169). Krupat's analysis of how cosmopolitan critics "convert political membership into aesthetic

articulation” (*Red Matters* 17) directly illuminates the problematic nature of Vizenor’s survivance concept. As Krupat notes, when Native presence becomes “primarily virtual” through narrative performance, “it may become harder to assert and maintain concrete political rights” (21).

Blaeser, however, offers a different interpretation, arguing that tribal stories serve as “maps that create, document, and affirm the existence of their world” (87). She contends that such “imaginative tribal accounts portray as vital and true” what academic accounts miss. However, this view overlooks how Vizenor’s metaphorical abstractions distance Native identity from political reality. The “Genome Pavilion” in *The Heirs of Columbus* is a place where scientists have “isolated the genetic code of tribal survivance and radiance” (143) exemplifies this problematic conversion rather than documenting or affirming tribal existence, Vizenor converts tangible tribal identity into scientific metaphor, replacing political presence with poetic abstraction. By reducing tribal identity to a genetic code that can be isolated in a laboratory, he inadvertently supports the very academic abstraction that Blaeser claims Vizenor’s work resists. This transformation aligns with what Garrouette and Westcott warn happens when stories are filtered through Western theoretical frameworks. They argue that “retold within narratives characterized by representational assumptions . . . the Anishinaabe myth loses the capacity to evoke a mythic reality” (75). More critically, such frameworks “rob this myth of powers, . . . disenable ‘possible lives’, . . . and foreclose specifically upon lives lived in the expectation and experience of oneness, of communion, of co-creation with The Mystery” (75-76). Vizenor’s postmodern approach exemplifies precisely this kind of representational framework that converts living stories into aesthetic objects.

Vizenor extends this problematic transformation of biological reality into abstract metaphor through his treatment of humor and trickster discourse.⁴ Where tribal humor historically serves as a practical tool for community resilience and resistance, in *Landfill Meditation* Vizenor mystifies it through

⁴ Trickster discourse in Vizenor’s works functions as a complex literary and philosophical strategy that combines humor, irony, and cultural subversion. In Native traditions, tricksters are liminal figures who, as Ballinger notes, are “marginal not only in refusing to abide by human moral and behavioral categories but also in eluding all attempts at definition and classification” (32). Vizenor adapts this traditional figure into a postmodern literary device that challenges colonial narratives through what he calls “survival trickeries.” His tricksters, like Almost Browne in *The Heirs of Columbus* or Griever de Hocus, operate at the boundaries between tribal and non-tribal cultures, using humor and simulation to subvert dominant power structures. These characters embody what Owens describes as figures “deconstructing rigid borders, slipping between the seams, embodying contradictions, and contradancing across every boundary” (41). Through trickster discourse, Vizenor transforms traditional resistance into a sophisticated literary strategy that both preserves and reimagines Native presence in contemporary contexts.

employing scientific imagery to characterize it as a “tribal elixir, a natural liberating holotrope, communal shamanic rhythms in the blood, and a wild genetic laser” (118). While Vizenor’s language is richly metaphorical, his description ultimately reveals how his approach favors poetic invention over practical opposition. His progression from “elixir” to “holotrope” to “genetic laser” moves increasingly away from tangible political action, each term more abstract and disconnected from real-world struggle than the last. This retreat from material reality becomes even more evident in his portrayal of trickster figures. In *Interior Landscapes*, characters like Almost Browne, Cedarbird, and Proude Cedarfair exist on what Vizenor describes as “survival trickeries on the borders, marcescent blues on the margins, on the colonial curbs” (73). Instead of confronting or resisting these marginalized positions, Vizenor reframes them as opportunities for literary innovation, celebrating the very boundaries that limit tribal sovereignty. The protagonist, Almost Browne, embodies this transformation through what Vizenor describes as “word wars in the snow” (*Interior Landscapes* 142), where tribal identity becomes a matter of linguistic play rather than political belonging. When Almost Browne declares that “crossbloods are the new warriors, fighting with stories instead of weapons” (156), the grammatical substitution “instead of weapons” explicitly replaces material resistance with linguistic performance. The noun “warriors” invokes traditional military resistance, but the prepositional phrase “with stories” converts warfare into storytelling. The temporal marker “new” suggests evolutionary progress from physical to narrative combat, implying that literary sophistication represents advancement over direct political action. Most problematically, the plural “crossbloods” generalizes this substitution across all mixed-blood people, suggesting that narrative performance rather than political engagement defines contemporary Indigenous identity. This substitution becomes even more evident in his description of crossblood consciousness as “a trickster signature on the margins of tribal time” (167), converting the material challenges of mixed-blood identity into opportunities for literary experimentation. The text’s treatment of family history particularly demonstrates this pattern. Rather than exploring how crossblood families navigate real-world tribal relationships and political obligations, Vizenor presents what he calls “mythic memories” where “blood becomes metaphor, ancestry becomes wordplay” (172). While this approach offers creative possibilities for reimagining identity, it risks undermining the concrete kinship relationships through which tribal nations maintain their political coherence. In *Dead Voices*, Vizenor reduces the trickster—traditionally a figure of practical resistance—to pure symbolism, claiming that “the trickster is a sign, a communal signification that cannot be separated or understood in

isolation” (83). The academic vocabulary—“sign,” “signification,” “isolation”—translates Indigenous cultural concepts into poststructuralist terminology. The phrase “communal signification” abstracts trickster teachings from their specific tribal contexts and practical applications, while the negative construction “cannot be separated or understood in isolation” prioritizes theoretical interpretation over cultural practice. By defining the trickster solely through semiotic function rather than cultural role, Vizenor completes the conversion of Indigenous knowledge into Western theoretical frameworks. By defining the trickster solely as a “sign” and “signification,” Vizenor completes the conversion of political action into abstract semiotics, severing the connection between tribal storytelling and real-world political struggle.

This shift of specific political action into symbolic representation becomes even more noticeable in his treatment of urban adaptation. While some scholars defend Vizenor’s approach to urban spaces, arguing that his stories “liberate shadows and the mind” (*Dead Voices* 16) and transform “the city into a sanctuary” (59) for tribal narratives—suggesting that storytelling enables rather than replaces embodied political practice—this interpretation overlooks how such conversion ultimately undermines territorial sovereignty. Through its protagonist Bagese, *Dead Voices* offers Vizenor’s most extensive exploration of urban Indigenous experience, presenting storytelling as the primary means of preserving Native presence in urban spaces. When she declares that “The city is our new tribal ground . . . we create presence through our stories” (124), the statement requires deeper scrutiny. While Bagese proposes that storytelling can create a form of urban sovereignty, the novel never addresses how such narrative presence might translate into actual Indigenous authority over urban spaces, resources, or institutions. This becomes particularly significant given the novel’s setting in Minneapolis, a city with a substantial urban Native population and history of Indigenous activism around issues of housing, healthcare, and political representation substantive concerns that the novel’s emphasis on narrative presence largely sidesteps.

Even more telling is Bagese’s assertion that “We heal with stories in the city . . . the old medicines are in our words now” (189). The temporal progression in this statement—from “old medicines” to “words now”—explicitly charts the transformation from material healing practices to linguistic performance. The prepositional phrase “in our words” spatially locates medicine within language rather than in plants, ceremonies, or healing practitioners. The ellipsis between “city” and “old medicines” syntactically bridges urban space and traditional practice, but the final clause “are in our words now” completes the conversion of embodied healing knowledge into abstract textual possession. While this

might offer a powerful metaphor for cultural adaptation, it risks obscuring the ongoing need for actual Indigenous medical institutions and services in urban environments.

Unlike Sherman Alexie, whose characters confront the tangible hardships of modern Native life, Vizenor reshapes these lived conditions into literary abstraction. As Weaver points out, Alexie tries in his stories, to “imagine Indians from the inside” (Weaver 223), depicting “the darkest parts of Native experience (alcoholism, poverty, suicide, and self-destruction)” (Baxter 167). This fundamental difference in approaching urban Indigenous reality exemplifies a broader pattern in how Vizenor’s work privileges aesthetic transformation over actual struggle. While Vizenor certainly addresses issues of poverty, violence, and policy in his work, his treatment consistently transforms these material conditions into opportunities for narrative experimentation. For instance, in *Bearheart*, the federal government’s attempt to seize Chippewa forest during an energy crisis—a concrete political crisis—becomes the catalyst not for organized resistance but for Proud Cedarfair’s symbolic journey and elaborate storytelling contests. This pattern of converting political conflict into narrative opportunity distinguishes Vizenor’s approach from writers who maintain clearer connections between aesthetic innovation and political action. By focusing on symbolic change instead of real-world action, he unintentionally helps the colonial idea of turning tribal nations into cultural performers rather than sovereign political entities.

We should not ignore the fact that Vizenor’s approach may present significant challenges due to its emphasis on humor and trickster discourse, which diminishes tribal political legitimacy by prioritizing creative expression over governmental resistance. Vizenor’s focus on creativity and narrative flexibility may reflect a form of resistance that transcends colonial structures, enabling Native communities to reclaim their stories and identities on their own terms. As Vizenor himself asserts, “the dynamic concepts of political and cultural liberty are . . . in the creative, sacred, dicey, and tricky narratives of Native survivance. Memorable Native narratives are clever and strategic. No traditions, no cultural or political practices dominate the creative chronicles of Native resistance” (*White Earth Nation* 10). By framing resistance as an act of cultural reinvention, Vizenor’s work could be seen as empowering Native individuals to challenge fixed stereotypes and assert their agency in innovative ways. This perspective positions creativity as central to Native resistance, suggesting that the fluid, transformative power of storytelling can unsettle colonial structures in ways that formal political channels cannot. Kimberly Blaeser argues that Vizenor’s stories embody what he sees as the essence of tribal story-

telling: “with their transformations, imaginative liberation, and creative play,” they reflect the “fluidity and resilience” of the trickster figure, who “constantly reshap[es] reality and identity through language and imagination” (84). Deborah Madsen similarly argues that Vizenor deploys “trickster hermeneutics as a liberation strategy: the tricky storyteller constantly shifts the ground under the monster’s feet, resisting the fixity that would enable the wiindigoo to locate and consume its victims” (“Discontinuous Narrative” 36). However, this emphasis on creative narratives comes at the expense of political and territorial sovereignty. While Vizenor’s celebration of “clever and strategic” Native narratives highlights the subversive potential of storytelling, it may also downplay the importance of structured political action and governance in securing and maintaining tribal authority. His claim in *Wordarrows* that “tribal words are neither the actual nature of experience nor the false representations of the real” (78) reflects what Louis Owens identifies as Vizenor’s broader pattern of “resisting the deadly definitions and categories of the dominant culture” (225). However, this epistemological stance becomes problematic when considered alongside Cook-Lynn’s warning that such theoretical moves risk “cutting off one’s self as a Native American writer from effective political action” (96). By rejecting tribal discourse as either “actual” or “false representation,” Vizenor undermines what Kicummah Teuton, describes as the “grounded political narratives” necessary for asserting sovereignty (83), weakening the foundational claims through which tribal nations assert their rights and experiences.

Additionally, this instability may present what Barry identifies as Vizenor’s broader engagement with “narrative chance in a new language game” (14). While Barry suggests that “chance brings together an evolving, not static, world of ritual with the postmodern world of possibility,” Schedler warns that such transformations risk reducing tribal authority to mere performance (39, 43). This concern becomes particularly acute in *Chancers*, where traditional trickster figures evolve into digital agents operating in virtual spaces. This privileging of simulation over material presence aligns with what Schedler terms “the dangerous aestheticization of tribal territories” (67). While some might argue, as Barry does, that Vizenor’s work demonstrates how “ongoing and always renewable narrative traditions and tribal rituals remain powerful” even in postmodern contexts (20), this celebratory view fails to address the material consequences of such transformation. The ability to renew narrative traditions, while valuable, does not necessarily translate into the ability to maintain tribal jurisdiction or protect treaty rights. The adaptation of tribal traditions to digital spaces, while potentially expanding the reach of those traditions, may simultaneously weaken their connection to specific territories and governance structures. This tension

becomes particularly acute when considering how digital presence affects tribal sovereignty claims that are fundamentally tied to physical land and place-based relationships. Rather than preserving tribal sovereignty through new forms of presence, Vizenor's emphasis on simulation and virtuality completes his transformation of material political authority into narrative display. The implications of this shift extend beyond theoretical concerns when tribal presence becomes primarily virtual, it may become harder to assert and maintain concrete political rights. This fundamental shift in how tribal sovereignty is conceived and expressed becomes even more prominent in Vizenor's treatment of absence and presence in tribal experience.

Presence in Absence, Sovereignty in Shadows: The Politics of Vizenor's Postmodern Aesthetics

The complexity of Vizenor's approach to sovereignty becomes even more apparent in his treatment of absence and presence as fundamental dynamics of Native American experience. Absence refers to the ways in which Native peoples have been erased and marginalized within settler colonial narratives, while presence signifies the resilient ways in which Indigenous communities continue to assert their existence and agency in the face of this erasure.⁵ Vizenor understands this dynamic not as a simple binary, but as a complex and often paradoxical relationship, where absence can be a generative space for new forms of presence to emerge (*Manifest Manners* 67). Building on the earlier discussion of how Vizenor's theories alter material realities into aesthetic representations, this tension can be looked at through the lens of absence and presence. Vizenor observes that, historically, Native peoples have been relegated to "an absence in

⁵ The tragedy of absence manifests in various forms throughout colonial and post-colonial discourses. One of the most persistent and pernicious aspects of the tragedy of absence is the myth of the "Vanishing Indian". The myth of vanishing Indians, idea that "the American Indian has been disappearing and is doomed to extinction" (Dippie 10), has served as an excuse to label the Indians as people of the past who do not exist anymore, a justification to categorize them as both authentic and inauthentic. The "authentic", as put in Philip Deloria's words, is a European category "created in opposition to a perceived state of in-authenticity" (101). This myth not only justifies colonial violence and land theft but also serves to relegate Native Americans to a romanticized past, denying them a place in the present or future or as put by Philip Deloria's words, "vanishing Indian savages a[re] now noble parts of a unified past" (90). Vizenor critiques this narrative in *Manifest Manners*, stating: "The indian was an occidental invention that became a bankable simulation; the word has no referent in tribal languages or cultures. The simulation of the indian is the absence of real natives—the contrivance of the other in the course of dominance" (11). By exposing the "indian" as a simulation, Vizenor challenges the very foundations of the "Vanishing Indian" myth, revealing it as a colonial fantasy rather than a historical reality. The persistence of this simulation in modern contexts demonstrates the insidious nature of the tragedy of absence.

history, the silence of translation, separation, and simulations” (*White Earth Nation* 26).

This theoretical sophistication, however, raises important questions about its practical implications. While Vizenor presents the interplay between absence and presence as a tool for Native resistance, his theoretical framework could transform sovereignty into mere performance or simulation. In other words, the interplay between absence and presence in Vizenor’s work is seen as a rhetorical strategy that dangerously privileges the immaterial over the material in the struggle for Indigenous rights and autonomy. In *Manifest Manners*, he develops this concept through poetic language, suggesting that “the shadows are the unsaid sense in names, the memories in silence, and the imagination of tribal experiences” (70). While poetically powerful, this formulation demonstrates what Warrior terms “the dangerous substitution of metaphysical presence for political power” (167). The potential consequences of this transformation become clear when examining how his emphasis on “unsaid sense” and “memories in silence” shifts focus from actual political struggle to metaphorical absence.

In Vizenor’s hands, the metaphor of shadows becomes a means of converting tribal political identity into abstract literary performance. In *Dead Voices*, he writes that “Shadow words are the traces of tribal memories . . . stories that connect the present with the past through the imagination” (43). The progression from “tribal memories” to “imagination” shows how thoroughly he converts historical continuity into narrative possibility. When he claims that shadows represent “the unsaid presence in tribal names” (*Manifest Manners* 73), he recasts material erasure into aesthetic opportunity. This problematic conversion recurs throughout Vizenor’s work. In *Chancers*, “Indian” becomes a “shadow name that has no substance” (13), while tribal presence emerges through “shadow citizenship in the ruins of representation” (27)—the progression from “shadow name” to “shadow citizenship” to “ruins” charts the dissolution of political authority into aesthetic metaphor. Similarly, in *Bearheart*, when “The tribes lost their shadows” (183), tribal restoration occurs through mystical communion with bears rather than political action, demonstrating what the scholar Alfred warns is “the dangerous reduction of tribal sovereignty to spiritual metaphor” (65). As Krupat notes, this approach risks “cutting off one’s self as a Native American writer from effective political action” (*Red Matters* 96).

This detachment from material reality reaches its apex in his conception of “word shadows.” In *Interior Landscapes*, Vizenor writes: “The shadows dance between the words, creating presence through absence, meaning through silence” (156). The very syntax reveals how thoroughly he has converted political resistance into linguistic play. As Cook-Lynn warns, this risks reducing tribal

nations to “performers of cultural identity rather than exercisers of political sovereignty” (48). The Derridean aspects of Vizenor’s approach further reveal its limitations. In *Dead Voices*, he writes: “The spirits of the dead spoke in the quiet moments of the night, their voices emerging from the spaces between words. The true stories of the tribes were hidden in these silences, challenging the binary oppositions of the living and the dead, the present and the absent” (54). This poetic engagement with silence and absence reflects Vizenor’s broader strategy of finding power in what colonialism has attempted to erase. Yet this very strategy risks further abstracting Native experience from its material foundations. When tribal histories are transformed into metaphysical spaces “between words,” their concrete political implications may be lost. This explicit engagement with poststructuralist theory demonstrates what Krupat identifies as “the privileging of theoretical sophistication over political efficacy” (*Red Matters* 96). The danger here lies not in the theoretical sophistication itself, but in how it distances Native resistance from the concrete realities of land claims, treaty rights, and tribal governance. However, some scholars argue that Vizenor’s theoretical sophistication serves a vital decolonial purpose. Blaeser contends that Vizenor’s trickster hermeneutics and sophisticated play with absence effectively “overturn the hypostatizations” (101) of colonial discourse, enacting a form of subversive resistance that operates at the level of epistemology itself. Hamilton extends this argument, noting that Vizenor’s work “moves beyond simple binaries of traditional/modern to imagine new possibilities for Indigenous futurity” (99). From this perspective, Vizenor’s theoretical innovations do not merely perform sovereignty but actively create new spaces for Indigenous self-determination by disrupting the conceptual frameworks through which colonial power operates. While these arguments highlight the subversive potential of Vizenor’s approach, they eventually fail to address its material implications for tribal sovereignty. We see this tension play out explicitly in *The White Earth Nation*, where Vizenor writes that “Native sovereignty is more than a resistance to dominance and presence more than a separation; sovereignty is a presence in natural motion, not a resistance or telegraphic absence” (42). While this definition appears to emphasize material presence, it converts political sovereignty into abstract “natural motion,” privileging theoretical movement over concrete political authority. Similarly, in *Dead Voices*, when Bagese declares that “We create presence in absence, power in the spaces between stories” (89), she reveals how thoroughly Vizenor has reshaped political resistance into storytelling practice.

The very act of moving beyond simple binaries, which Vizenor’s work consistently promotes, risks dissolving the distinct political categories through

which tribal nations maintain their sovereign status. Vizenor in *Bearheart* presents this dynamic: “The tribal world was dead, the reservation was dead, the tree people became urban metaphors searching for new digital stories” (167). Rather than mourning or resisting this loss of material sovereignty, the text celebrates the transformation of “tree people” into “urban metaphors,” suggesting that tribal presence can exist primarily through narrative evolution. *Bearheart* reveals how thoroughly this transformation operates. The text opens with a concrete political crisis—the federal government’s attempt to seize the Chippewa forest during an energy crisis. Rather than depicting direct resistance to territorial theft, Proud Cedarfair responds by burning down the forest and embarking on a symbolic journey. The geographical movement from specific Chippewa territory to abstract journey converts territorial sovereignty into mobile storytelling opportunity. The novel’s structure mirrors this: opening with federal seizure, it immediately shifts from political resistance to ceremonial travel, from collective tribal response to individual visionary experience. When Proud performs healing rituals, they become “word medicine” rather than actual ceremonial practices. Survival depends not on maintaining territorial sovereignty but on mastering what Vizenor calls terminal creeds suggesting that tribal continuance exists primarily through narrative rather than political resistance.

Vizenor’s transformation of material sovereignty into performance manifests across multiple aspects of his work from his treatment of tribal stories and traditions to his approach to identity and governance. While this alteration offers powerful tools for deconstructing colonial narratives, it consistently privileges narrative innovation over political action, artistic transformation over material authority, and cultural performance over sovereign rights. This pattern becomes particularly evident in his treatment of urban Native experience and digital presence.⁶ The implications of this theoretical approach become most

⁶Digital presence, as conceptualized in Vizenor’s works, represents the extension of Native American identity and sovereignty into virtual spaces. In *Chancers*, Vizenor explores this through characters like Cedarbird, who describes himself as “a trickster with a computer, a trickster in the best tradition of transformation, and a secret agent for a virtual ethnic intelligence agency” (11). This concept gains particular significance in contemporary contexts where Native communities navigate between physical and digital manifestations of sovereignty. As recent scholars like James Mackay note, Vizenor’s concept of transmotion takes on new meaning as Indigenous peoples engage with virtual spaces and transnational networks. In *The Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor presents digital technology as both a challenge and opportunity for Native presence, particularly through Almost Browne’s use of virtual reality to present evidence in court, demonstrating how digital tools can be used to assert Native sovereignty in new ways. For further reading on Digital presence in Native American contexts: Mackay, James. “Visionary Sovereignty in Vizenor’s Futurism” (2022); Baudemann, Kristina. “The Future Imaginary in Indigenous North American Arts” (2022); Hans, Birgit and Madsen, Deborah L. “Indigenous Futurism” (2020).

evident as tribal sovereignty increasingly extends into digital spaces. In *Chancers*, Vizenor envisions a future where “Native presence pulses through fiber optic networks, our stories dance in electronic spaces” (156), converting territorial sovereignty into virtual performance. The metaphorical transformation of tribal presence into electronic “dance” reveals how thoroughly political authority becomes artistic display. This shift toward virtual presence reflects what Barry describes as the “postmodern condition as an invitation to narrative chance in a new language game” (4). In *The Heirs of Columbus*, this transformation reaches its apex when Stone Columbus declares that “Our sovereignty exists in the telling, our presence in the stories we share across digital plains” (178). The very syntax reveals the substitution of storytelling for political power in which sovereignty “exists in the telling” rather than in material reality. This complex interplay between absence and presence in Vizenor’s work extends naturally into his broader theorization of narrative power, where storytelling becomes not just a means of resistance but potentially a substitute for political authority.

Narrative Power: From Political Authority to Storytelling Performance

In his innovative theoretical frameworks, Gerald Vizenor positions storytelling as a transformative force that transcends conventional political resistance. Despite the apparent empowerment of Native voices through Vizenor’s narrative focus, his approach may undermine tribal sovereignty by prioritizing storytelling over strategic political mobilization, reframing geographical claims into literary tropes, and substituting performative cultural expression for concrete material struggle. Vizenor’s approach diverges significantly from other prominent Native American writers who maintain a strong connection between storytelling and political sovereignty. Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and Sherman Alexie consistently ground their narratives in the concrete realities of Native experience, insisting on the vital links between stories, embodied practices, and land-based struggles. This approach aligns with Craig Womack’s understanding that “a key component of nationhood is a people’s idea of themselves, their imagining of who they are. The ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature, contributes to keeping sovereignty alive in the citizens of a nation” (*Red on Red* 14). Crucially, Womack’s formulation maintains the connection between literary expression and political nationhood, whereas Vizenor’s approach often severs this link. Where Vizenor often privileges expressive innovation over political engagement, these writers demonstrate how storytelling can serve as a powerful tool for asserting tribal sovereignty and resisting co-

lonial encroachment. As Womack in “Theorizing American Indian Experience” suggests, such approaches build on how “means of identifying community members, understanding geographical relationships with neighbors, and working out jurisdiction have always existed among tribes, even if such understandings have changed over time” (361-62). In *The Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor suggests that storytelling is not merely a cultural practice but a biological necessity for Native survival: “[Their] stories are genes of survivance” (132). This metaphor positions narrative transmission as being as crucial as genetic inheritance for Native continuance. Through this biological metaphor, he establishes storytelling not merely as a cultural practice but as a fundamental mechanism for both survival and resistance. This fusion of storytelling with biological continuity suggests that cultural performance can substitute for material sovereignty, aligning with Daniel Heath Justice’s understanding of Indigenous nationhood as encompassing “a common social interdependence within the community, the tribal web of kinship rights and responsibilities that link the People, the land and the cosmos together” (151).

However, this celebration of storytelling’s transformative potential reveals the problematic core of Vizenor’s approach, particularly when contrasted with the work of other Native writers. While Silko’s *Ceremony* insists on “the irreducibly physical nature of healing rituals” and material ceremonial practices (142), Vizenor claims in *Dead Voices* that “The ceremonies are now in our stories . . . we dance in words rather than around fires” (167)—converting embodied practice into narrative performance. Similarly, Louise Erdrich’s novels consistently map Native sovereignty onto intimately known ancestral landscapes. In *Tracks*, for example, Erdrich shows how tribal identity and sovereign governance emerge from a deep connection to particular lakes, forests, and traditional hunting grounds. Vizenor, on the other hand, claims in *Interior Landscapes* that “The mountains become words, the rivers flow through our stories . . . sacred places exist in the telling rather than the land” (187). This transformation of physical territory into narrative space exemplifies what Sean Teuton identifies as Vizenor’s privileging of “textual presence over territorial rights” (83). The divergence between Vizenor’s approach and that of other Native writers becomes even more pronounced in the context of urban Indian experience. When Bagese in *Dead Voices* declares, “The city is our new tribal ground . . . we create presence through our stories” (124), she articulates Vizenor’s vision of storytelling as a substitute for political sovereignty. However, as Vizenor himself acknowledges, “Natives have been considered an absence in history, the silence of translation, separation, and simulations” (*White Earth Nation* 26). While he suggests that “in spite of the ironic scenes of democratic encounters, duplicity, and betrayal, the

tribute of natural reason and totemic associations, cultural sovereignty, sentiments of survivance, and reminiscence of continental liberty are appreciated in Native narratives” (27), this emphasis on narrative appreciation risks obscuring the brutal material realities of contemporary urban Native life.

In contrast, Sherman Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* directly confronts the poverty, violence, and despair that characterize the urban Indian experience. As Stephen F. Evans observes, Alexie’s stories depict “the social conditions that produce alienation, despair, and self-destructive behavior among contemporary reservation Indians” (52). Alexie himself has described his work as “a way of writing about the real world, the world of poverty and pain” (Berglund and Roush 168). Where Vizenor’s characters find liberation in the construction of “story sanctuaries,” Alexie’s protagonists struggle to survive in a world that offers little material sanctuary or support. Alexie’s uncompromising portrayal of urban Native life aligns with Brian Boyd’s observation that “Narrative is always strategic, both for teller and listener, in ways that can range from the callously selfish to the generously prosocial” (11). Alexie’s stories strategically expose the harsh realities often obscured by dominant cultural narratives, insisting that listeners confront the ongoing legacies of colonialism and marginalization. In this sense, his work enacts what Boyd describes as narrative’s potential to “offer ways of reasoning about action: analogues or ‘parables’ to guide our social planning; models to emulate or spurn; or merely images of the range of human character, situations, and behavior” (12). By unflinchingly depicting the “range of human character, situations, and behavior” that define contemporary Native experience, Alexie’s stories challenge readers to reason about the actions necessary for meaningful social and political change.

These comparisons reveal how thoroughly Vizenor privileges storytelling over the material practices and land-based struggles that remain crucial for other Native writers. His theoretical frameworks, though innovative in their challenge to colonial discourse, detach indigenous resistance from the political realities and sovereign structures that enable collective action. Discussing survivance in *The White Earth Nation*, Vizenor explains that Native presence extends beyond mere survival—it’s an active force expressed through storytelling. However, this emphasis on stories as an active presence potentially obscures the harsh material conditions that continue to shape Native lives. As Vizenor himself acknowledges, Native Americans have become an absence in the cultural, economic, and political discourses of the nation and continue to face ironic, distorted representations in media, literature, and education. Given these ongoing challenges, celebrating storytelling as a substitute for political action may potentially perpetuate the very marginalization that Vizenor seeks to resist. Just as Vizenor’s

theory of storytelling changes political resistance into narrative performance, his treatment of crossblood identity further exemplifies this shift from material sovereignty to aesthetic display. Vizenor's shapeshifting and dynamic conception of crossblood identity, which emphasizes the liberating potential of cultural hybridity and post-national "survance," challenges the legal and political boundaries that form the basis of Indigenous self-determination.

Crossblood Identity: From Political Sovereignty to Cultural Performance

Vizenor's celebration of crossblood identity as unlimited fluidity undermines the political boundaries essential to tribal sovereignty, transforming resistance into performance. By celebrating dynamic identities and post-national forms of "survance," Vizenor's vision of crossblood liberation challenges the legal and political boundaries that form the basis of Indigenous self-determination.⁷

To understand why this matters, it is important to recognize that Vizenor's treatment of crossblood identity addresses a real problem: the blood quantum logic that serves colonial elimination. By refusing tragic mixed-blood narratives and reimagining crossblood identity as creative possibility rather than cultural diminishment, Vizenor challenges oppressive racial categories. His emphasis on "crossblood consciousness" as dynamic offers alternatives to both colonial racialization and rigid essentialism. This explains why his approach has proven influential—it speaks to the lived experience of many Indigenous people with mixed heritage. Yet this is precisely where the political danger lies. By celebrating crossblood fluidity so thoroughly that it dissolves into universal tribal identity, Vizenor's solution to one colonial problem—racial categorization—creates another: the erosion of the specific political boundaries through which tribal nations maintain sovereign status. The appeal of his crossblood theories and their political risks are inseparable—both stem from the same emphasis on fluid, post-national identity that transcends boundaries.

Cook-Lynn's approach to representation offers a crucial counterpoint to Vizenor's emphasis on performative identity. As Baldy demonstrates in her

⁷ Vine Deloria Jr. discusses this dynamic in his review of *The Invented Indian*, noting that for centuries, whites have had "unrestricted power to describe Indians in any way they chose," while "Indians were simply not connected to the organs of propaganda so that they could respond to the manner in which whites described them" (398). As Michael Hardin argues, this ability to control representations of Native people is "deeply invested in the idea that the past exists to support the hegemonic structures of the present" (35).

analysis, “Cook-Lynn engages popular culture in a discourse that supports Native nationalistic goals . . . Cook-Lynn obviously sees the importance of these representations and how they are tied to Native nations’ self-determination and sovereignty” (100). This perspective insists on maintaining clear connections between cultural expression and political power, viewing representation as a tool for advancing sovereign rights rather than a substitute for them. Such grounding in material political struggle directly challenges Vizenor’s more abstract approach to Native identity. This fundamental difference becomes evident in Vizenor’s characterization of crossbloods as “agonistic survivors” who outwit the sentiments of manifest manners with wit and humor” (*Crossbloods* vii). Where Cook-Lynn sees cultural expression as serving concrete political ends, Vizenor privileges clever subversion over direct confrontation with colonial power structures.

In the introduction to *Wordarrows*, Vizenor positions mixed-blood individuals as central to his narrative project, writing that they serve as “the trickster signature and cosignature of new narratives” (x). This metaphor emerges within his broader argument that crossbloods “overturn the monologues of manifest manners” by embodying what he calls “the creative contradictions of crossblood experiences” (ix). However, this aesthetic celebration obscures the concrete legal challenges crossbloods face regarding tribal citizenship. By transforming mixed-blood identity into a “signature” or literary device, Vizenor converts what are often painful experiences of political exclusion into opportunities for narrative innovation. The lived reality of navigating blood quantum requirements, tribal enrollment processes, and community belonging becomes raw material for aesthetic experimentation rather than grounds for political critique. Moreover, the trickster becomes the primary model for crossblood agency, but as Cook-Lynn argues, “freeing the individual from the masks of cultural identity” can come at the cost of “substitut[ing] cultural fluidity for political boundaries” (45). Cook-Lynn’s critique points to a crucial weakness in Vizenor’s framework: the danger of dissolving the very categories through which tribes maintain their sovereign status. This concern is echoed by Womack, who aligns Vizenor’s work with poststructural theories “interested in those identities that break down oppositions, that challenge distinctions between insider and outsider status, that remain ambiguous, and asks if a theoretical approach that values obfuscation as much as clarification is consistent with Native worldviews” (“Single Decade” 71-72). In the context of crossblood identity, this question becomes especially pressing: can tribal nations maintain political coherence when the very categories of membership become sites of endless play and ambiguity?

This emphasis on identity’s mutability over political foundations stands in marked contrast to other Native writers who insist on the enduring link

between cultural continuity and territorial sovereignty. These writers understand that political power requires concrete, place-based relationships rather than abstract theoretical constructs. While Vizenor emphasizes mutability and transformation, these writers recognize that, as Gilio-Whitaker argues, “Indigeneity is irreducibly defined by relationships to place and people, and is inescapably mediated by relations of power and processes not of our choosing” (11). Gilio-Whitaker’s emphasis on relationships and power structures underscores how sovereignty demands more than narrative flexibility—it requires sustained engagement with material political realities. This grounding in concrete political practice, rather than abstract theory, finds further support in Pewewardy’s observation that “sacred sovereignty relies on the people’s ability to uphold the sacred teachings found in spiritual beliefs and based on each nation’s unique spiritual principles. Sacred sovereignty is strengthened and reinforced through ceremonial practices, sacred histories, and the use of language” (69).

This grounding in specific places and political relationships is exemplified by Leslie Marmon Silko, who centers her mixed-blood characters’ personal and political awakenings around the reclamation of ancestral Laguna Pueblo lands and migration stories. In Silko’s *Ceremony*, Tayo’s healing hinges on his ability to re-enact cultural traditions tied to specific sacred sites, asserting, as Carden puts it, that “Native survivance resists settler-colonialist domination and refutes historical pastness in stories, traditions, and customs that affirm cultural sovereignty” (98).⁸ Similarly, Louise Erdrich’s crossblood characters consistently grapple with the legacies of allotment and the fragmentation of Anishinaabe territories, their personal struggles intimately bound up with the political fight for treaty rights and tribal jurisdiction. As Carden notes, Erdrich portrays Native women in particular as bearers of “the responsibility for cultural stories and the relationships enlivened by shared stories, “positioning the “continuance of

⁸ Cultural sovereignty, as it appears in Vizenor’s work and broader Native American discourse, represents a complex form of self-determination that extends beyond political or legal autonomy. Unlike political sovereignty, which focuses on territorial rights and governance, cultural sovereignty emphasizes the power of Native peoples to define, maintain, and transform their cultural practices and identities on their own terms. In *The White Earth Nation*, Vizenor connects cultural sovereignty to survivance and continental liberty through Native narratives. However, scholars like Elizabeth Cook-Lynn caution that emphasizing cultural expression risks reducing tribal nations to cultural performers rather than political entities. Critics such as Taiaiake Alfred and Robert Warrior have also noted the potential dangers of separating cultural sovereignty from political power. This tension between cultural expression and political authority remains central to debates about Native self-determination. Cultural sovereignty thus encompasses both the right to maintain traditional practices and the freedom to adapt these traditions to contemporary contexts, though scholars continue to debate whether this approach strengthens or potentially undermines tribal political sovereignty. For further reading on cultural sovereignty in Native American contexts: Alfred; Cook-Lynn; Warrior; Vizenor; Justice.

tribal tradition, both through childbearing and through transmission of cultural values” as a cornerstone of Indigenous nationhood (100). Vizenor’s approach to crossblood identity reflects broader debates about belonging and exclusion in Native communities. As Sabine N. Meyer argues in “Blood Quantum and Tribal Citizenship,” “The centrality of blood quantum in American culture has led Native American nations to defend an ultimately race-based concept of citizenship that threatens to exclude ever-larger parts of their populations” (169).⁹ This observation reveals a crucial paradox in tribal sovereignty: the very mechanisms designed to protect tribal identity and political autonomy may ultimately threaten their continuance. Blood quantum requirements, originally imposed by colonial authorities, have been internalized by many tribes as a means of maintaining political boundaries and protecting limited resources. Yet this defensive strategy creates its own form of colonial elimination, one that operates through demographic mathematics rather than direct violence or forced removal. As Doerfler points out, “Blood quantum is mathematical termination. Once Native nations disappear, the U.S. government will finally be free of their treaty and fiscal responsibilities” (83). Doerfler’s stark assessment highlights how blood quantum requirements serve the settler state’s interests by creating conditions for tribal nations to legislate themselves out of existence. While Vizenor’s rejection of blood quantum as a measure of Indigenous identity offers one response to this crisis, his emphasis on unlimited fluidity and hybridity may inadvertently support the dissolution of tribal political boundaries that blood quantum, despite its problems, attempts to maintain. This tension between preservation and elimination, between maintaining political boundaries and ensuring tribal continuance, demands solutions that can balance both cultural dynamism and political sovereignty. This understanding of blood quantum as a tool of eventual termination adds urgency to Vizenor’s rejection of such racial metrics of identity.

Vizenor’s emphasis on fluid identity and cultural hybridity poses significant challenges to traditional conceptions of tribal sovereignty. His rejection of blood quantum as a basis for tribal citizenship reflects his prioritization of cultural identity over political status. In *The White Earth Nation*, he asserts that

⁹ Blood quantum: Initially used by the federal government to classify Indianness during the late 1800s in the United States, many American Indian tribes have adopted the use of blood quantum to define “membership in the group” (Schmidt 2). Blood quantum is basically the amount of “Indian blood” that an individual possesses. The BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) an agency of the US federal government, issues what is called a “Certified Degree of Indian Blood,” similar to an ID card. See Paul Spruhan’s *A Legal History of Blood Quantum in Federal Indian Law to 1935* (2001), Jack Forbes’s *The Blood Grows Thinner: Blood Quantum*, Part 2. (2008).

“family descent, not the racial burden of federal blood quantum, determines cultural identity, personal associations, and citizenship” (43). While challenging imposed colonial logics of race is crucial, Vizenor’s alternative risks, as Sean Kikummah Teuton argues, “dissolving the very mechanisms through which tribes maintain their political boundaries” (78).¹⁰ Vizenor remains strikingly silent on the specific procedures and principles that would replace blood quantum in determining political membership. As Krupat in “Review: Culturalism and Its Discontents” observes, this silence reveals how thoroughly Vizenor’s framework transforms tribal citizenship from a concrete legal category tied to collective rights and responsibilities to a fluid cultural affiliation based on “personal associations” and “the values Vizenor term[s] continuance and survivance” (132). Or in Gilio-Whitaker’s words, “Culture is perceived as disconnected from sovereignty, slipping into the realm of personal possession where Indian identity is claimed as a right” (8). This disconnection of culture from sovereignty is particularly problematic as it aligns with broader colonial efforts to reduce tribal nations from sovereign political entities to mere cultural performers. By emphasizing personal cultural expression over collective political rights, Vizenor’s approach could facilitate the very processes of political erasure it purports to resist. Moreover, his emphasis on individual “personal associations” over tribal citizenship criteria threatens to undermine the legal and political frameworks through which Native nations maintain their sovereign status and protect their territorial rights. In contrast to successful nation-building approaches which require “complementary rather than confrontational character toward the state and the provinces” (Poliandri 117), Vizenor’s aesthetic transformation of sovereignty risks undermining the very foundations of practical political engagement. The implications of this shift become clear in declarations like that of Stone Columbus in *The Heirs of Columbus*: “racial identification and tribal enrollment were colonial theories. We should . . . make the world tribal, a universal identity” (162). The ellipsis bridging “colonial theories” and “universal identity” performs crucial ideological work, suggesting logical progression from rejecting imposed categories to embracing limitless inclusion. The verb phrase “make the world tribal” transforms “tribal” from specific political designation to universal cultural category, dissolving the boundaries between Indigenous nations and global populations. The phrase “universal identity” creates a contra-

¹⁰ While Vizenor’s crossblood concept does engage politically with blood quantum, the crucial question is what alternative he proposes. Unlike other critics who seek to replace blood quantum with culturally-grounded citizenship criteria, Vizenor advocates for unlimited fluidity that risks serving colonial interests.

diction: identity traditionally implies distinction and specificity, while “universal” eliminates all boundaries. Most problematically, the imperative “we should” positions this dissolution of tribal specificity as moral obligation rather than political choice, implying that maintaining distinct tribal nations represents ethical failure rather than sovereign right. While the critique of colonial race thinking is apt, the leap to a post-national universal tribal identity is a bridge too far. Such a move, as Cook-Lynn warns, represents “the ultimate dissolution of tribal sovereignty into cultural affiliation” (47), sacrificing the political distinctiveness of Native nations for an abstract sense of global solidarity. It exemplifies what Coulthard identifies as the “cultural recognition” paradigm that too often aims to reconcile “Indigenous claims to nationhood with settler state sovereignty” by translating those claims into the “respectable” language of identity and tradition (3). Vizenor participates in this translation, reframing Anishinaabe political identity in aesthetic terms legible to settler institutions. Yet as critics note, this discursive move often serves state interests by defusing Indigenous struggles to dismantle material structures of dispossession.

Vizenor’s literary portrayals of crossblood identity, which celebrate dynamic identities detached from political membership, stand in stark contrast to how many other Native writers approach this theme. Writers like Louise Erdrich depict mixed-race characters who actively grapple with maintaining tribal connections despite colonial disruption. In Erdrich’s novels, urban Indian characters ground their personal journeys in specific cultural and political contexts, positioning the reassertion of political sovereignty and treaty rights as essential. As Catherine Rainwater notes, in Erdrich’s work, “a self cannot be properly understood apart from its interactions with, and radical exposure to, the other selves with whom it shares a particular place” (121). According to Rainwater, this emphasis on communal relationships and specific geographies challenges individualistic Western notions of identity. Erdrich centers her work on “the role of land and community in determining selfhood” (121)

This grounding in place and community is also evident in other Native authors’ works. Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* insists on the centrality of ancestral knowledge and tribal military resistance, even when depicting global Indigenous coalitions. In *Solar Storms*, Linda Hogan’s mixed-race protagonist Angel develops her identity through reconnecting with her Anishinaabe community’s resistance to land theft and cultural erasure. As Hogan writes, Angel comes to understand herself as part of “a people” defined not by blood purity but by this shared history of struggle (351). These works collectively suggest that mixed-blood identity need not entail a post-national detachment from tribal political life, as Vizenor’s universalist vision might suggest. Instead, it can serve as a

powerful catalyst for asserting Indigenous land rights and self-determination. For these authors, survival and cultural continuance remain deeply tied to material struggles for land and self-determination.

However, for Vizenor, his ostensibly more grounded portrayals of urban mixed-bloods reflect his privileging of dynamic cultural expression over political obligations. In *Earthdivers*, for example, crossbloods “dive into unknown urban places, into racial darkness in the cities, to create a new consciousness of coexistence” (ix). This metaphorical framing of urban Indigenous experience reveals Vizenor’s tendency to privilege poetic abstraction over material reality. Rather than engaging with the concrete challenges faced by urban Native communities—issues of housing, employment, cultural preservation, and political representation—Vizenor transforms their experience into an aesthetic journey. The language of “diving” into “racial darkness” to forge “new consciousness” untethers Native presence from specific lands, communities, and governing structures. This detachment from material concerns becomes even more problematic when considering the real stakes of urban Indigenous sovereignty. While Vizenor celebrates the “tease” and “contradiction” of mixed-blood artists who “would prove by their stories that no bloods are pure” (*Earthdivers* 18), he offers little sense of how such semiotic play translates into meaningful political action. In Vizenor’s *Earthdivers*, crossblood survival becomes a matter of navigating what Vizenor describes as “the ruins of tribal representations” (*Manifest Manners* 5) rather than directly confronting the ongoing structures of settler occupation.

Vizenor’s urban crossblood characters thus, obviously, contrast sharply with those of Sherman Alexie, whose mixed-blood protagonists in novels like *Indian Killer* and short story collections like *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* remain intimately tied to reservation communities even as they navigate the alienations of the city. For Alexie, the urban Indian experience is defined by the enduring realities of colonial violence, poverty, and racist stereotyping, not some abstract cosmopolitan hybridity to form a “universal tribe”. In his short story “The Search Engine,” Alexie suggests that the challenge for modern mixed-blood individuals is to “build a new tribe” in the city while still remembering and remaining connected to “the tribe at home” (18). Alexie is suggesting that Native people in cities can create new forms of art and culture while still remaining politically committed to their tribes’ struggles for independence and rights. He doesn’t see these as opposing forces being creative and modern doesn’t mean abandoning the fight for tribal self-determination.

While Alexie emphasizes maintaining tribal connections in urban spaces, Vizenor moves in a radically different direction, pushing crossblood iden-

tity toward a universalist extreme. This is particularly evident in *The Heirs of Columbus*, where Vizenor envisions Point, “the first nation in the histories of the modern world dedicated to protean humor and the genes that would heal” and “the wild estate of tribal memories and genes of survivance in the New World” (*Heirs* 119). Through Point, Vizenor constructs a utopian space that celebrates transformation and mobility over fixed tribal affiliations. While this vision offers an imaginative response to colonial categories, it sidesteps the practical challenges of maintaining tribal sovereignty in contemporary contexts. The complex realities of tribal governance, resource management, and political negotiation are replaced by an idealized vision of boundless transformation. The novel’s emphasis on “protean humor” and healing through genetic science reveals Vizenor’s vision of crossblood identity as fundamentally about transformation rather than political resistance. This privileging of transformation over tangible political action reflects a broader pattern in Vizenor’s work—the tendency to resolve material conflicts through symbolic solutions. This vision manifests most clearly in the novel’s central concept of the “signature of survival” a combination of genetic therapy and tribal storytelling used to heal those wounded by colonial violence. While this fusion of scientific and traditional healing practices might seem to offer a powerful model for contemporary Native identity, it ultimately reduces complex political struggles to matters of individual healing. At Point, scientists and tribal healers work in tandem, where “the scientists delivered the genetic signatures; the tribal healers touched the wounded and heard their creation stories” (*Heirs* 144).

This hybrid approach to healing evokes the idea that for Vizenor, crossblood identity isn’t about maintaining political boundaries but about transcending them through a mixture of scientific advancement and cultural memory. As Stone Columbus declares, “we heal with opposition, we are held together with opposition, not separation” (*Heirs* 175), suggesting that crossblood identity emerges from productive tension rather than political resistance. This idea actively rejects the specific tribal affiliations that Alexie sees as crucial to urban Indigenous survival. While the novel suggests this universal tribal identity would result in cause “nothing to lose but racial distance” (*Heirs* 162), critics like Arnold Krupat argue that such post-national theories inadvertently align with “the forces of consumer capitalism and the ideology of individualism” that work to transform “the members of Native nations into so many American Indians, people of Native ancestry rather than citizens of the nations from which they descend” (“Review Culturalism and Its Discontents” 133). Through this lens, Vizenor’s concept of survivance, while celebrating individual liberation and cultural creativity, risks undermining collective political struggle by disconnecting

personal identity from specific tribal nations and their ongoing fights for sovereignty. The implications of Vizenor's approach become particularly concerning when considered in the context of contemporary challenges facing Indigenous peoples. While Vizenor's crossblood characters find a form of personal "sovereignty" by treating their disconnection from tribal politics as a kind of playful literary exercise, Robert Warrior argues that this purely cultural nationalism "does not have enough teeth to make a real difference" (123).

This critique becomes especially pointed in light of Glen Coulthard's stark assessment that "For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die" (173). Coulthard's statement emphasizes that Indigenous survival requires concrete political action specifically, the strong assertion of inherent rights to land and self-determination rather than just symbolic or aesthetic expressions of identity. This material struggle stands in sharp contrast to Vizenor's focus on literary playfulness and universal tribal identity. While Vizenor's emphasis on literary playfulness and universal identity has its merits, it's essential to understand, as Robert Warrior argues, that cultural and political resistance must work in tandem. The rich tradition of Native literature offers alternative approaches that unite personal transformation with collective political action. These writers recognize what Carden describes as the longstanding role of "Native women . . . 'associated with the continuance of tribal tradition, both through child-bearing and through transmission of cultural values'" (100). This connection between cultural continuance and political struggle becomes particularly vital in today's context, where Indigenous communities face mounting threats from the Keystone XL pipeline to the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women. While Vizenor's survivance and creative performance offer valuable tools for challenging colonial thinking, they risk minimizing what truly matters for Indigenous liberation: territorial rights, kinship responsibilities, and the authority of tribal governments. What emerges from this analysis is how Vizenor's concept of crossblood identity, despite its intellectual sophistication, ultimately serves to dissolve rather than strengthen tribal sovereignty, failing to address the urgent material challenges facing Indigenous peoples today. By transforming political boundaries into cultural mutability, tribal citizenship into individual liberation, and sovereign authority into cultural demonstration, his framework risks undermining the very foundations of Indigenous nationhood. While his theories provide generative tools for rethinking colonial logics, their practical implications warrant caution. Alternative models of resistance, grounded in the political and material particularities of tribal communities, remain vital for advancing Indigenous self-determination in the face of ongoing settler encroachment.

The complex legacy of Vizenor's theoretical innovations demands nuanced assessment. While his works provide powerful tools for deconstructing colonial narratives, his consistent privileging of narrative performance over material politics risks undermining tribal sovereignty. Yet the practical manifestation of his ideas in the White Earth Constitution suggests a more complex relationship between aesthetic and political sovereignty. As Vizenor writes, "The Constitution of the White Earth Nation was conceived by a Native stance of resistance, by the shared sentiments of survivance, by the associations of continental liberty, and by the native intuition of cultural sovereignty and democratic constitutional governance" (*White Earth Nation* 59). The White Earth Constitution represents a crucial test case for translating Vizenor's theoretical concepts into governance structures. While the document moves away from blood quantum requirements, it struggles to provide clear alternative criteria for tribal membership—an ambiguity that, while philosophically aligned with Vizenor's resistance to fixed categories, poses practical challenges for determining voting rights and resource distribution. The Constitution's handling of territorial rights reflects the limitations of Vizenor's approach when confronted with actual political needs: it must ultimately address specific questions of land rights, resource management, and political authority that resist purely narrative solutions. These tensions return us to a fundamental question about Native literary criticism. As Christopher Teuton asks, "What is the relationship between our theories and the people we are theorizing about? Do the subjects of our theorizing see themselves in the same way as we describe them in books, journal articles, classroom lectures, and so on?" (204). Vizenor's theoretical innovations, while intellectually sophisticated, may create representations of Native identity that many Indigenous people would not recognize in their own lives and struggles. The challenge facing Indigenous nations is not to choose between cultural expression and political power, but to find ways of asserting both that strengthen rather than diminish tribal sovereignty. Moving forward, the crucial task becomes harnessing the decolonial potential of Vizenor's theoretical insights while maintaining the material foundations of tribal nationhood—only by keeping this tension in view can Native writers and activists forge paths toward genuine liberation that preserve both cultural vitality and political sovereignty.

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主權的陰影：傑拉爾德·維澤諾 與原住民抵抗的美學化

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摘要

本文批判性地審視傑拉爾德·維澤諾（Gerald Vizenor）的理論框架與文學策略，揭示其精密的後現代方法，雖為分析殖民再現提供了有力工具，卻可能冒著將部落主權轉化為美學表演的風險。通過對維澤諾主要作品及核心概念——包括存續性（survivance）、影子在場（shadow presence）、混血身份（crossblood identity）與詭計者論述（trickster discourse）——的細緻分析，本研究論證其理論介入如何可能削弱而非增強部落主權力量。

本文分析追溯維澤諾如何處理缺席，將物質性抹除轉化為敘事機遇；其在場喜劇如何將抵抗從政治行動轉向美學遊戲；其存續性概念如何將具體生存轉化為說故事表演；以及其詭計者論述如何藉由賦予敘事模糊性優先於法律與政治確定性，而動搖領土主權的基礎。本文援引當代美國原住民研究的學術成果，揭示維澤諾對敘事創新、文化混雜性與虛擬在場的強調，儘管理論上精密複雜，卻有溶解部落主權賴以在法律與政治上維繫之範疇的風險。透過對特定文本與理論概念的檢視，本文論證維澤諾的框架如何持續賦予美學轉化優先於物質政治權力，可能提供表演主權的空洞自由，同時卻削弱行使主權的能力。

此外，儘管維澤諾的理論精密性，為理解殖民再現提供了寶貴洞見，並為文學分析提供了有力工具，其實際效果可能在於暗示部落主權能夠主要通過文化表演而非政治權威存在——這一轉變在原住民自決的持續抗爭中亟需審視。

關鍵字：傑拉爾德·維澤諾、部落主權、詭計者、存續性、混血身份

