

GROTESQUE VIOLENCE AND HUMOR IN GERALD VIZENOR'S *BEARHEART: THE HEIRSHIP CHRONICLE*

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ABSTRACT

Gerald Vizenor seeks to challenge static definitions of Native American identity in his early novel *Bearheart*. To this end, he fills the novel with grotesquely violent and humorous scenes which give the work a seemingly perverse appearance. The normalized violence and the grotesque humor throughout the novel, however, disrupt socially normalized concepts and thwart the reader's notion of normality which is a reminiscent of "realism" as a traditional mode of narrativization. Violence theories of scholars like Schinkel, Arendt, and Benjamin together with humor theories of Morreall, Cohen, and Carroll are drawn upon in order to clarify the interconnected mechanism of humor, grotesquery, and violence in producing tribulations in the narrative line of *Bearheart*. This aesthetic strategy, which is aligned with a dexterous manipulation of focalization, is used throughout the novel to break the unquestioned authority of masternarratives and also to help the already marginalized Native Americans' voices produce their own narratives of identity.

RESUMEN

Gerald Vizenor busca desafiar las definiciones asentadas sobre la identidad de los Nativos Americanos en una de sus primeras novelas, *Bearheart*. Con este fin, su novela está llena de escenas

grotescamente violentas y humorísticas que le dan a la obra una apariencia perversa. Tanto esta violencia normalizada como este humor grotesco a lo largo de la novela, sin embargo, alteran los conceptos normalizados e impiden la noción de normalidad del lector, reminiscencia del realismo como modo tradicional de narración. Se recurre a los estudios sobre la violencia como los de Schinkel, Arendt, y Benjamin y a los teóricos del humor Morreall, Cohen y Carroll para clarificar el mecanismo de las interconexiones del humor, de lo grotesco y de la violencia que producen tribulaciones en la línea de la narrativa de *Bearheart*. La estrategia estética, junto con una hábil manipulación de la focalización, se usa a lo largo de la novela para romper la autoridad incuestionable de las metanarrativas y así ayudar a los Nativos Americanos, cuyas voces han sido marginalizadas, a que produzcan sus propias narrativas con respecto a su identidad.

INTRODUCTION

Gerald Vizenor in his first novel, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicle*, re-introduces the trickster figure to the contemporary novel. *Bearheart* is a challenge to Native American stereotypes while Vizenor strategically fills *Bearheart* with violent and sexual imagery to subvert static definitions of Native Americans. The story takes the form of a quest when Proud Cedarfair is driven out of his ancestral home. So the fourth Proud Cedarfair and his wife Rosina travel through the ruins of American civilization set in the seventies in order to reach the window to the fourth world. On their way other “pilgrims” join them for their own reasons. In this article, we argue that a trickster focalizer’s narration of grotesque violence and humor leads to an unrestrained and often paradoxical definition of Native American.

There are some scholarly works which discuss the liberation of Native American identity in *Bearheart*, though almost none considers the role of violence and humor significant in making the Native American identity transformative. Among these scholars, Meg Armstrong focuses on the liberation of Native American identity through the somatic violence which is exercised on the body of different characters. She declares that “[In] *Bearheart* the body becomes a metaphoric conjuncture of personal identity, and a history of dispossession and violence” (Armstrong 291, emphasis added). Vizenor employs the excessive violence to overcome the static beliefs or, as he calls them, the terminal creeds which are “beliefs

that seek to impose static definitions upon the world” (Owens 249). So “the hyper-violence of *Bearheart*,” as McClure notes, “functions in significant ways with respect to Vizenor’s undoing of terminal creeds” (54). It means that the violence in *Bearheart* helps annihilate all of the fixed meaning systems which keep the meaning in a loop and doom it to be under the control of the violence of language. In regard to the violent language of *Bearheart*, Jeff Berglund affirms:

As he has commented in interviews, Vizenor purposely deploys violence through language to make readers acknowledge the effect of violence that is ignored: ‘to deny violence is to create victims, ultimate victims, people who can be controlled merely by the symbolic appearance of violence. Because to deny violence, to control people, all one needs to do is suggest violence. (Berglund 134)

The violence of the language system bars the production of dynamic meaning, so it creates inflexible mind-sets for people resulting in lack of multi-dimensional and creative thought while Vizenor beats language at the end of its own game through exposing it to excessive violence, so that it can regain hybridity. Although the aforementioned scholars consider the violence in *Bearheart* from different aspects, violence is only a marginal point in their arguments. In conjunction with the minor scholarly attention violence receives, researchers hardly refer to the grotesque humor of the novel which leads to an alteration in definitions of Native Americanness through destroying the static definitions of Native American identity.

Even though the violence can have other functions in the novel, we argue that its main purpose in *Bearheart* is to undermine stereotypical, and at the same time, normalized definitions of Native American identity. In this context, Seyyed Mohammad Marandi and Mohsen Hanif maintain that

Vizenor constantly draws his audience’s attention to excessive representation of surreal sexual and violent scenes in order to “upset”—in Vizenor’s terminology—the longstanding unquestioned benchmarks of normality. (148)

In other words, normality is nothing but a construction which needs to be disturbed and *Bearheart* best does this by strategically

deploying grotesque violence and humor. Marandi and Hanif also aptly propose that through the incorporation of humor, Vizenor tries to target the feelings of his readers rather than their intellect (157). The novel targets the readers' emotion to wake them up from the trance that deprives them of an imaginative life. Thus, Vizenor first underlines the artificiality of the concepts that the readers take for granted and then, through violence and humor he endeavors to break the impenetrable surface of language which assigns Native Americans a prosthetic identity. *Bearheart* brims over with violent scenes and language as well as grotesque and humorous descriptions of pilgrims on their journey to the fourth world; those who metonymize the readers, too. Accordingly, Joseph L. Coulombe notes:

In *Bearheart*, Vizenor hopes to inspire humor, imagination, and continued change among his readers. Traversing *Bearheart*, they set out (perhaps unknowingly) on their own pilgrimage toward a fourth world that is theirs to imagine in good humor. In the process, readers share the opportunity to transform themselves, a creative act that will ally them with others equally independent and thoughtful. (95)

Coulombe touches on the transformative function of humor while here we attempt to highlight the grotesque quality of the humor, which subverts a static conceptualization. Nevertheless, Alan R. Velie looks at humor differently "to Vizenor," as he maintains "humor is the supreme virtue, the thing that keeps man from taking himself too seriously, and allows him to retain his perspective and honesty" (Velie 81). On the other hand, in an interview with Dallas Miller, Gerald Vizenor suggests that the humor in his works is both natural and healing (80). Based on these scholars, *Bearheart's* humor is both destructive and constructive because it shatters the rigid definitions of Native American in order to revive it creatively. Even though these scholars discuss humor in Vizenor's work, they disregard its inherent grotesque quality. The grotesque humor in *Bearheart* manages to expose fixed definitions and belief systems, so that they can be remolded and redefined. Hence, the humor in *Bearheart* has a healing mission in drawing the words out of the pit of stasis.

Moreover, the extensive and wry humor slips into both the characterization and the plot of the novel. In *Bearheart* characters may seem incongruous and humorous. But beneath their hilarious appearances and behaviors lies a serious and political intention

which is to restore dynamism to the immobilized definition of Native Americanness. In this respect, Elizabeth Blair remarks that “Vizenor’s names and masks are at one and the same time hilariously funny and deadly serious” (Blair 88). The characters’ attitudes towards Native American identity are like puzzles, pieces of which Vizenor constantly rearranges. The continuous rearrangement of different definitions of identity creates a vortex which devours characters who stick to the hackneyed and stereotypical beliefs about Native-Americanness. Also, humor is unquestionably one of the most distinguishing features of trickster figures, including the ones who appear in Vizenor’s works. Regarding tricksters, Nora Baker Barry explains:

If Vizenor sees the trickster figures balancing “good and evil with good humor,” his bear guides balance the physical and the spiritual. Those who lose their balance because of becoming possessed by either side of the balancing act, by what Vizenor calls in numerous texts “terminal creeds,” are destroyed. Bear shamans in Vizenor’s texts have balancing ability, and, similar to the bear guides of the *midewiwin*, try to convey their spiritual knowledge to others, to preserve traditions, and to incorporate those traditions into the contemporary reality of the texts. (110, emphasis in original)

Bearheart, the trickster narrator of the novel, is the epitome of such characteristics. The manner of Bearheart’s narration, next to violence and humor in their extremity, moves the definitions of Native American identity beyond the traditional scope. On the other hand, *Bearheart* successfully manages to make the reader look at human identity in more creative ways. In this line, Patricia Linton argues that “[*Bearheart*] challenges the autonomy and priority of human selfhood in a variety of ways, some fundamentally disquieting” (8, emphasis added). *Bearheart* makes the readers feel overwhelmed, yet this disturbance is necessary to reshape the readers’ outlook.

Vizenor is determined to expose the constructed nature of Native Americanness, and thus he pushes the ideas to their limits, and to that end, one of the tools he employ is violence. McClure observes that “not only is Vizenor attacking how whites perceive Indians, he also attacks the way in which Native Americans perceive

themselves, and this aspect of the novel emerges at times in highly disturbing ways” (50). In addition, Vizenor makes an effort to make readers reconsider the values and concepts they live by. In “Walking Backwards into the Fourth World: Survival of the Fittest in *Bearheart*” Maureen Keady points out that in *Bearheart* Vizenor thwarts the reader’s expectations through the depiction of peculiar violence and sex (61). The matter-of-factness of the events in *Bearheart* shocks the readers forcing them to make a keener observation on the novel so that they can infer why the narratives of gory events are so cold-heartedly and indifferently portrayed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ted Cohen provides a twofold definition of humor. He explains that when someone with a sense of humor finds something funny and laughs, it can be called humorous. However, he further indicates that defining the qualities of either sense of humor or the things arousing humor is quite relative. Thus, no certain definition of humor may be provided (376). Similarly to Cohen, John Morreall associates humor with laughter, too. He identifies the funny state of objects and situations as the source of laughter and humor while paying a closer attention to humor as a way of challenging social conventions. So he states,

not only is laughter biologically odd, but the activities that elicit it are anomalous. When we’re out for a laugh, we break social conventions right and left. We exaggerate wildly, express emotions we don’t feel, and insult people we care about (2).

Therefore, humor may cause some pain and inconvenience when its true intention is correction. He reminds us that “laughter, while based on superiority, serves as a social corrective” (Morreall 8). Although humor causes temporary unbalance, it heals and purifies the social and behavioral infirmities.

In the same fashion, Kenneth Lincoln argues “the powers to heal and to hurt, to bond and to exorcise, to renew and to purge remain the contrary powers of Indian humor” (5). Lincoln clearly emphasizes the contradictory nature of humor’s power in correcting the faults. So in order to redefine the concepts, humor needs to disorganize them which sometimes distorts the normal face of the world and makes it look insane. Hamlin Hill identifies logic and

sensibility as components of Native American humor, but he holds that these characteristics have faded away by the passage of time. Therefore, modern American humor is rather insane (171). Humor bends the concepts and makes them incongruous in order to showcase their malfunctioning. Nevertheless, incongruity stems out of the transgression of the norms which Noël Carroll affirms to be a link between horror and humor. He states:

Thus, on the incongruity theory of humor, one explanation of the affinity of horror and humor might be that these two states, despite their differences, share an overlapping necessary condition insofar as an appropriate object of both states involves the transgression of a category, a concept, a norm, or a commonplace expectation. (154)

Transgressing the norms magnifies mistakes and provides an opportunity for correction. As Cohen suggests, humor includes a sense of power which allows one to be freed from restrictions of language (380). On the other hand, transgression is a common ground that humor shares with the grotesque. Similarly, Bernard Mc Elroy acknowledges:

The grotesque transforms the world from what we “know” it to be to what we fear it might be. It distorts or exaggerates the surface of reality in order to tell a qualitative truth about it. The grotesque does not address the rationalist in us or the scientist in us, but the vestigial primitive in us, the child in us, the potential psychotic in us. (5)

Therefore, similarly to humor, the grotesque functions through disturbing and surpassing what is known to be normal. Also, in *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail M. Bakhtin discusses the relation between the grotesque and the human body; accordingly, he describes the grotesque body as a continuation of the world. So the organs of the body which can have connections with the world are emphasized. He remarks:

The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open

mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other. (26)

Playing with the body and making it seem grotesque, therefore, helps to manipulate human identity. Hence, the grotesque puts up a play so that it can distort and treat irregularities that on the surface seem regular. For another thing, transgression of the norms is also a ground violence treads upon. Among different theoreticians who examine violence, Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt discuss it in the domain of means and ends. Benjamin categorizes his discussion into the natural law and the positive law. For him violence in the realm of the natural law is something that comes naturally to people and they are exposed to it (278). Correspondingly, Arendt asserts that the end of violence is beyond man's control. Thus, one should recognize the innate arbitrariness of violence. "Moreover, while the results of men's actions are beyond the actors' control," Arendt argues, "violence harbors within itself an additional element of arbitrariness; [...]" (4). Therefore, both Benjamin and Arendt concede that violence can be combined with factors such as law and force which impede our efforts to offer any exclusive discussion of violence in itself. Thus they believe that to address violence, it should first be bracketed off from other notions.

Arendt undertakes to differentiate violence from force (4). Likewise, Willem Schinkel maintains that violence is distinct from force but still he highlights that force is the root of violence (19). Schinkel, furthermore, blurs the boundaries between real and fictional violence to show that they can flow into each other. Consequently, their collision creates a new space which Schinkel calls the frictional violence. "The real and the fictional," he notes, "coincide and it is the space of their friction, the merging of real violence and fictional violence into what I will call *frictional violence* [...]" (128, emphasis in original). Considering violence in the domain of fiction, Michael Kowalewski is concerned to demonstrate how forms of expression make a fictive work violent. Words are the writers' tool and these are different shapes of language which lead into various qualities texts reflect. As a result, Kowalewski explores

American fiction's representation of violence through language, and it is the verbal representation which matters to him:

violence in American fiction frequently offers a vivid means of dramatizing or initiating some form of conflict and action: whether classic or racial tensions, a novel long search for revenge, or a permanent disruption of someone's view of the world (perhaps a reader's) as a stable or equitable place. (4)

So violence can occupy different positions in fiction, one of which is disrupting the readers' view to show the artificiality of the concepts they live with. Mark Ledbetter thinks that violence creates the opportunity of breaking the autonomy of the master plot so that the narrative can reveal an ethic which is the unheard voice of the victim. For that to happen narrative violates the body, "and yet, the language of body metaphor must include the violated, the mutilated, the diseased body in order to lay claim to any ethical understanding of the world" (Ledbetter 13). When violence is exerted on the body of the text, the parts can have their own voice which can be heard, and which strives to stand up against the master plot. In general, the narrative voices become multiple and tell their own stories against the monopolizing tendencies of the master plot.

In contrast, Kowalewski contemplates the difficulty of representing violence in fiction (12). Also, Elaine Scarry underlines that the scarcity of representation of physical suffering becomes apparent when one notices the abundance of representations of other kinds of suffering in literature (11). Moreover, she emphasizes that pain has an intricate relationship with wielding power (12). As a result, violence and pain are deemed related; those who utilize violence in the world of fiction are occupiers of the seats of power. Vizenor shreds to pieces the body of his narrative to balance the power relation between Native Americans and their "others" who have constantly endeavored to induce Native Americans to subscribe to predetermined and essential definitions of identity.

DISCUSSION

VIOLENT AGGRESSIONS AND THE REBIRTH OF NATIVE AMERICAN IDENTITY

To the question of Songidee Migwan who asks “What is your book about?” Bearheart replies “Sex and violence” (Vizenor xiii). However, through them, Vizenor explores the Native American identity. Vizenor employs a plethora of scenes inundated with extreme violence and humor to subvert the fixed and stereotypical outlook on Native American identity. “The principal target of this fiction is the sign ‘Indian’ with its predetermined and well-worn path between signifier and signified” (Owens 250). Through violence and humor Vizenor takes it on himself to both resist and transcend the readymade definitions of Native American identity in an elaborately interwoven network of signifiers. Rigel-Cellard states:

At best it can be called an intercultural work, forever withholding the message that one thought one had deciphered, forcing the reader who has not thrown the book through the window by page thirty to embark along with the hero Bearheart and with each horny tribulation to peel off the masks of the misreading of Indianness. (93)

The evolution of meaning in *Bearheart* takes place tortuously because the story strives to withhold any certain and single meaning from the reader. So *Bearheart* can be called a writerly text since it demands the reader’s utmost participation. However, it frustrates the reader’s expectations and deliberately endeavors to (re-)decipher itself (Benito *et al.* 94). To be more specific, the designed gaps in the novel engage the reader and create the feeling of intimacy between the reader and its fictional narrator. The narrator, saint Louis Bearheart, who is a trickster figure claims to be the writer through whom the narrative is focalized. In fact, Vizenor uses numbers of narratological strategies, including the conscious employment of a trickster focalizer, to lay down his politics of violence and humor.

According to Gerard Genette, focalization is the point of view which the narrator adopts (10). The person who perceives the story can be different from the one who tells it, and the reverse can be true, too. Genette categorizes focalization into three groups: Zero focalization, external and internal focalization. Zero focalization is achieved when the author’s knowledge transcends that of the character’s (189). In the case of external focalization, the narrator knows less than the character and plays the role of the observer, like Hemingway’s narrator’s role in “Hills Like White Elephants” wherein Hemingway only reports the conversation between the two characters avoiding any interpretations (198). However, in internal focalization,

the narrator's knowledge barely transcends the focal character. So there should be neither outside descriptions nor references to the focal character (192). Thus, based on Genette's theories, *Bearheart* is an internal focalizer.

Bearheart is the hero who also narrates the story. If the narrator is present as a character in the story, Genette calls it homodiegetic. Moreover, when the narrator is the hero, he uses the term autodiegetic (244-245). Hence, saint Louis Bearheart is the homodiegetic, autodiegetic focalizer who narrates the story on the extradiegetic level dealing with the main events of the story. Additionally, the extradiegetic level is the first level of narration which deals with the main events of the story (Genette 229). Bearheart is a trickster focalizer whose narrative is tricksterian, too. "*Bearheart*, like all of Vizenor's fiction," Owens remarks, "is a trickster narrative, a postapocalyptic allegory of mixed-blood pilgrim clowns afoot in a world gone predictably mad" (248). Therefore, the narrator of *Bearheart* is innately violent for his tricksterian nature which makes him a liminal figure. Bearheart metamorphoses into a bear and his abilities are beyond those of a normal human being. In the same context, Barry remarks that

as the breakers of barriers, they [bears] are the beings at the doorways between realism and magical realism, between horror and transcendence in Vizenor's texts. They bridge the gaps between the secular and the spiritual and connect the physical and the spiritual (95).

Trickster figures in the novel break the barriers imaginatively and creatively. They inspire the readers to free their imaginations from conventional restrictions and to reimagine a free world beyond the systematic limitations.

The trickster nature of Proud Cedarfair makes him a multi-dimensional and dynamic figure which fits in no certain human or animal group. So through using trickster characters in the narrative line, Vizenor manages to violate the normal characterization. The other trickster figure, apart from Proud, is Inawa Biwide who enters the fourth world with him at the end of the novel. Regarding tricksters, Zubeda Jalalzai reckons that the trickster figures, that

make subversion possible for Vizenor in *Bearheart*, have other antecedents apart from their Native American roots (25). However, the insurgency of tricksters suits their unruly demeanors which lead to the subversion of clichéd and often biased judgments about the Native Americans.

Despite the evident atrocity in different parts, *Bearheart* narrates the scenes of violence as if normal everyday experiences and also without passing any judgements to the reader or describing the pain the victims experience. Anne C. Hegerfeldt calls it the “rhetoric of banality” which renders elements from the extra textual world as fantastic by means of giving an account of the events in a calm, matter-of-fact tone (200). Matchi Makwa, one of the characters in *Bearheart*, talks about savagery committed on tribal people in a highly unemotional language:

The racist filiation killed dozens of reservation drunks when the tribal government canceled the leases. The drunks were pulled apart between automobiles. When the end of gasoline came, the violent filiation used knives and forks and spoons in their ritual assassinations. The dark eyes of tribal victims were popped with spoons and heel tendons were severed. While the victims struggled to escape, crawling on hands and knees with images swirling from each dangling eyeball, the whites stabbed at the victims with sharp forks. Before death came to most of the tribal victims their ears and lips and genitals were removed. (Vizenor 54)

Matchi Makwa is one of the very first pilgrims who join Proud Cedarfair and his wife Rosina on their way to Saint Pueblo. Apart from the events that *Bearheart* narrates at the extradiegetic level, there are many other stories narrated at the metadiegetic level. The narration of the violent scene at the metadiegetic level ruptures the narrative’s autonomy. Genette applies the metadiegetic to the narration of events that take place at the second level of narrative but still are intradiegetic (232). When minor focalizers narrate at the metadiegetic level, the reader feels distracted from the main course of the story. Diversion from the main focalizer to various other focalizers is one of the techniques Vizenor employs to violate traditional narrativization that hypnotizes the reader. What the novel’s different focalizers’ tell on the metadiegetic level persuade the reader to actively participate in re-evaluating the significance of the various stories. Moreover, in the narration of brutally violent scenes, the diction of the narrators is shockingly dirty and blasphemous.

Besides, the narrators explain the violence committed against the body with the outmost precision and grotesquery. In the aforementioned scene, Vizenor criticizes the violence in the media as the eyeball is dangling from the Native American victims' eyes in Matchi Makwa's description. On the same basis, Rigel-Cellard observes that "One can also perceive under all the excess of Vizenor's novel a criticism of mass culture, of films in particular, which more and more exploit sex, violence, even cannibalism [. . .]. If the pilgrims are lusty, it is never out of cruelty" (100). To be clearer, *Bearheart* graphically portrays violence to underline the chaotic nature of the real world in which a lot of people are victimized any minute.

Vizenor's criticism of the movie industry can also be inferred from the novel's special treatment of violence. *Bearheart* reflects the fascination with violence in the world despite the fact that people denounce it. According to Schinkel,

For what is probably the majority of the public, a form of schizophrenia exists: it is able to condemn the acts of violence reported on the news and then switch to the latest movie in which violence is the prime sales mechanism. (127)

That is how people abhor violence in any form while they blindly and ignorantly victimize each other since they are unable to think beyond the rigid systems. *Bearheart* violently assaults the readers to make them think and see in less habitual and more critical ways.

Vizenor successfully demonstrates how much violence is rampant in our daily lives while it more often escapes our attention. The other point is narration of violent events regardless of the focalizer and the level of narration. Both the main and minor focalizers describe violent scenes in detail fostering such grotesque qualities which Bakhtin describes "[as] a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming." He also adds that

the relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis. (24)

Subsequently, terminal belief systems fail when they become ambivalent. Then an opportunity of producing new transformative definition of Native American identity is awaiting us which suits the postmodern context.

By charging the novel with such scenes, any already normalized concept which is based on moral codes and rationality are destructed to let the readers review their views towards Native Americanness. Armstrong argues that Vizenor uses the body as a tool to subvert the dominant representations of Native American identity in literature and other mediums like media (266-267). In addition, the focalizers use an extremely lewd and nude language. In the novel, we can notice the most outstanding instance of putting an “impolite” language to use (e.g. pages 87, 126, 135, 140, 151, 174,176, 232, 239). “Theoretically speaking,” Marandi and Hanif write, “one way a literary work shows resistance to the dominant literary forms is through the strategy of ‘excess’. One type of excess is to overload the narrative with deformity and nudity and the transgression of ‘polite’ language” (150). Peoples’ thoughts and speeches are made out of words which follow a predetermined design, not allowing people to think beyond the barriers of language. Although violence of language remains in the shadow, the only way to bring it to light is to make it abnormal as in *Bearheart*.

FROM VIOLENT AGGRESSIONS TO HUMOROUS TRANSGRESSIONS: THE “REVIVAL” OF NATIVE AMERICAN IDENTITY

Vizenor upsets the normal flow of the language and plays with it to target the prudish Anglo-Saxon logic. Moreover, violent descriptions are so exaggerated that they verge on humor. When the character Matchi Makwa gives an account of barbarous attack of whites who pluck out the eyes of Native Americans, he civilly and prudently explains that they use forks and spoons which make it look humorous while keeping its gruesome and violent air. The world of *Bearheart* contains many illogical and crazy events which are both violent and humorous. As Hill maintains, insanity is one of the components of modern American humor (171). Given that, a reason why the world of *Bearheart* is humorous is to be found in the streaks of “insanity” in both plotline and characterization. On the other

hand, Vizenor also reverses the “frontier gothic” which Velie describes:

[. . .] a romantic novel of terror set in the western wilderness with Indians playing the role of satanic villains, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* is the obverse: it is a novel of horror written from an Indian point of view about a group of Indians forced from the security of their woodland reservation and driven in to the civilized west where cowboys, fascists, and other enemies attempt to exterminate them. (75)

Vizenor reverses the frontier gothic when he gives voice to the Native Americans and lets them narrate their own stories rather than leaving it to whites to produce narratives about them. In the novel, the whites torture and harass the Native Americans, as one of the character, Matchi Makwa, tells us they use knives and forks to shred the native people to pieces.

Bearheart narrates it like an ironist, who, in Richard Rorty's terminology, is a person who has doubted the “final vocabulary” at his/her disposal and knows that arguing within the boundaries of his/her final vocabulary can neither dissolve nor solve his/her doubts. Moreover, the ironist makes no attempt to find reality. Hence, ironists only play the concepts against each other (73). Bearheart's narration style is ironic since he diverts from the main events to the other rather trivial ones to create grotesquely violent and humorous fragments. Moreover, he plays language games disturbing the logic of the language system. Bearheart narrates: “Show me the heirship documents. Would you read? Yes, but where? There our heirship in the closet [. . .] Listen ha ha ha haaaa” (Vizenor xiii-xiv). Changing heirship to hairship violates the language and makes it seem humorous altogether. Regarding this, Paul Beekman Taylor remarks:

The style of *Darkness* draws the reader to assume a trickster mythographic stance and participate imaginatively in the war of words that Vizenor wages to dismember the current secular word and remember the English language with the mystery of myth. In this respect *Darkness* is an emetic that purges both diseased sounds and graphic shapes of words. Appropriately, Bearheart's story is

called a “word war,” and its introduction is both prelude to and ludic heart of its warring issues. (174)

Through violating words, Vizenor both empties them of the meaning they typically carry and makes the reader reconsider them while simultaneously the body of the text breaks apart. When violation happens, words fail to mean so narrative loses its coherence and autonomy providing an opportunity for the silenced voices to be heard. In this perspective, Ledbetter draws our attention to the peripheral existence of the victim in relation to the central position of the master plot. However, he asserts that the victims should tell their own stories even from the margin. Ledbetter observes that

reading and writing which reveal absence are aware of the victim’s peripheral existence in relation to the master plot’s centered existence and in turn look for ways to tell narrative’s story from the peripheral perspective, that is, by presenting absence. (6)

The harsh language which forms the body of the text along with the violation of the flesh of the characters is the moment when Vizenor rips the static definitions of Native American identity apart. Then, new expositions can be generated which remain fluid and unfixed. Considering the characters’ savage deeds and shocking language, Armstrong declares that the “exploration of the body, primarily of its depth and limits in the context of sexual violence and pleasure, is a metonymical transformation of the sign and the possibility for new identities, new ‘body language’ ” (283). So, there is a tight relationship between alteration of the Native American body and identity that deployment of violence and humor make possible.

At the same time that language games help Vizenor free Native American identity from rigid definitions, these games move the narrative to the superior position which is beyond the control of language’s logic and make it powerful. “The humor of wordplay and related forms of wit, for instance, may fairly be thought of as incorporating a sense of power, the power to free oneself from the normal strictures of language” (Cohen 380). Thus, the humor like the violence in *Bearheart* has politically liberating function as it aims at engaging the reader emotionally. “Through its humor, *Bearheart* affects the audience’s emotions much more than their intellects” (Marandi and Hanif 157). Vizenor offers an opportunity of a change

and a rebirth of Native American identity when he harshly raids readers' feelings.

Along with word play which adds up to the humorous quality of the text, the humor is also evident on the level of the plot and characterization. "The Vizenorian techniques of greatest interest are comic. His comedy is political, sometimes viciously so, and trained on communal sustenance" (Salaita 135). Vizenor employs the humor in order to make the readers reconsider whatever they take to be authentic; to accomplish this, he violently humors the concepts. In the following excerpt, Bigfoot explains his act of savagery against a man; a violence which may seem slightly justifiable to the reader. Since Bigfoot does it to defend his beloved, though when figuring out that his beloved is only a bronze statue, the reader is shocked. The exaggerated scene which is only one among many in the story makes the readers rethink such words such as honor, love, and justice:

Amazing you say, two years at home for cutting the head and cock from a whiteman? True, but judicial folks were downright pleased to meet an old fashioned passion killer, a killer who made sense, because most of the killings going on are reasonless now. Random living and random loving and random death. New generations with no causes and no effects in their machine minds. When the judge read the sentence the jurors one by one came up to shake my hand and congratulate me for having passion and determination. Strange people. What the jurors will never know is that, the woman the object of my love and passion, whose honor I defended, is made out of public park bronze. (Vizenor 83)

Bigfoot narrates the story of killing a man for the honor of the bronze statue on the metadiegetic level which is both violent and humorous like most of other similar scenes in the narrative. Although humor and horror's relationship is more of opposition, there is a point of overlapping because both horror and humor stem out of the transgression of norms (Carroll 154). So the scene contains both humor and violence for it transgresses what the reader expects and also there is violation of the moral codes the implied reader lives by. What Bigfoot narrates is quite incongruous and thus humorous. Regarding incongruity, Morreall postulates:

The core meaning of “incongruity” in standard incongruity theories is that some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations. Once we have experienced something incongruous, of course, we no longer expect *it* to fit our normal mental patterns. Nonetheless, it still violates our normal mental patterns and our normal expectations. That is how we can be amused by the same thing more than once. (Morreall 11)

Defending the honor of a statue is ridiculous although as Bigfoot says it has delighted the jurors since most of the violent actions are senseless. Hence, the jurors are happy to meet a killer who has committed a crime for a logical reason although ironically they are unaware of the truth. Vizenor dexterously exposes the existence of reasonless violence in the world that shows human beings are innately uncivilized. According to Schinkel, sometimes the reason for committing violence is no reason and nothing more than violence for violence’s sake (107). Therefore, the novel lays bare the great potential of humanity to commit violent acts. The characters’ behavior is most of the times unreasonably vicious since they adhere to no law other than their own. They use violence to consolidate their power and position. On the same basis, Benjamin writes that “if that first function of violence is the law making function, this second will be called the law preserving function” (284). Bigfoot kills his rival for stealing the bronze statue which is against Bigfoot’s law. Hence, Bigfoot savagely kills the transgressor to preserve his law.

Furthermore, Bigfoot cuts the man’s genital organ. Yet, there are many other examples where human genitals are grotesquely torn apart. When Rosina and Proud are in escapehouse, sister Willabelle, one of the women dwelling the house, narrates the unfortunate and grotesque events that have happened to her:

“Worms covered my body and fed on my tender parts. The worms wormed through the openings in my ears and nose and vagina. I could feel them crawling inside of me . . . Then, when I crossed the river to a tribal village on the other side. Hundreds of fish grabbed at the worms and took parts of my flesh with their razor teeth.” (Vizenor 41)

Sister Willabelle’s narrative grotesquely depicts how the human body falls apart. Bakhtin observes that the degradation of the human body – especially the lower organs – is most often employed in grotesque realism. He maintains:

To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (22)

In the story of sister Willabelle, the fish and other creatures have eaten her ears, mouth, and vagina. This is one of the many scenes in which the human body, particularly the genitals are shred to pieces. Then, the image of the body becomes grotesque which blocks the body from staying whole and autonomous. So no sense of identity remains. In line with that, McElroy explains,

The world intuited by the grotesque is one in which identity may be wholly or partially lost through transformation of the individual into something subhuman, or in which he is susceptible to aggression by magical, irresistible means" (16).

Not only is the human body desecrated but also the same thing simultaneously happens to the body of the text. Ledbetter remarks that moments of transformation to identity and worldview have nothing to do with the image of a healthy body. On the contrary, transformative moments are when the body is exposed to violence. Ledbetter speculates:

Narratives, as bodies of text, like human bodies, seek a certain coherence, which I would describe as the healthy body of literature. What is normative for the healthy narrative, at least its superficial reading, is for the reader to be able to "sum the story up", in a few sentences, or rather succinctly relate to you and me "what the story was about". Writing and reading the text as healthy body, though, is an exercise in ellipsis and serves to gloss those scarring moments in a text which are, as in life, inevitable. And such a relation to narrative is naive. No narrative is without moments of disruption, when the body-text is violated. (16)

Bearheart, in terms of both content and form of presentation, transgresses the normalized morality. In Bakhtin's view, the profanity of language is one of the most important characteristics of the grotesque (17). The employment of taboo, swearwords, and

curses enhances the effect of violation and incompleteness which the author seeks to create. For “in studying fictional violence one must explore the power of words to sicken and befoul as well as freshen and redeem” (Kowalewski 11). *Bearheart* and minor focalizers like Matchi Makwa, and Bigfoot use words to narrate stories that are comically and violently exaggerated. Drawing a distinct boundary between violence, humor, and grotesque in *Bearheart* is almost impossible since the fiction’s treatment of these concepts is very liminal, and thus it forbids categorization.

The boundaries of different genres, narrative, and language are played upon and violated in different layers to create the utmost rupture in the narrative to reveal an ethic which relies on a protean nature of Native American identity. Ruptures in the narrative make the readers actively involved in the process of reading. In the case of *Bearheart*, the rationale is the emancipation of the Native Americans trapped in biased, conventional representations. Ledbetter argues:

A broken and disrupted narrative is exceedingly frustrating, if not a moment of profound fear. Losing one’s place within the story line confuses the teller and reader of tales, forcing writer and reader to stop and ask, ‘where am I?’ in this story. This moment of critical self-reflection makes us rethink our place in the story, its significance, and perhaps forces us to explore why we were distracted. (2)

The readers have to pause and rethink the events of the story and its logical basis. Besides, through freeing the imagination of the reader from the constructed limits of linguistic and societal norms which block creative thinking and imagining, Vizenor highlights the failure of language to further subvert the conventions in the representation of the other. Vizenor incorporates plenty of physical violence to exert maximum influence on the readers. He attempts to affect the readers’ sensibility through using violence which produces pain so it can paradoxically both enthrall and detach the readers. On the one hand, fictional violence is desirable because it does really and physically victimize people. On the other hand, this violence is derided because it also includes a description of the victim (Schinkel 128). What adds to the peculiarity of the violent events in the novel is the purposeful negligence of the characters’ experience and expression of the pain. When the cripples tear Little Big Mouth to pieces, the narrator focuses on the actions and atrocities of the

cripples rather than the pain Little Big Mouth goes through. As if Little Big Mouth has been intentionally devoiced:

Sun Bear Sun climbed over dozens of crippled bodies. When he was near his little woman in the center of the pile he saw them pulling at her flesh with their teeth and deformed fingers. Others were taking frantic turns thrusting their angular penises in to her face and crotch. Little Big Mouse was silent but the cripples moaned and drooled like starving mongrels. The lusting cripples slapped their fists, thrust their beaks, pushed their snouts, and scratched the perfect flesh with their claws and paws. Then the savage white cripples pulled her flesh apart. [...] she was carried away by the white cripples, heart and brain and undigested food. The cripples carried with them parts of her never known to their own imperfect bodies. (Vizenor 151)

In spite of all the details Bearheart gives of the death Little Big Mouth experiences, no description of her pain and suffering is given. The only thing Bearheart tells us is that Little Big Mouth remains silent and that indicates how pain is, at least linguistically, unrepresentable. In this regard, Scarry assumes, pain cannot be shared because it resists language (4). Thus, the person who is suffering is unable to convey the experience through language. Armstrong also states:

This violence is, quite obviously, the genocide of American Indians: *Bearheart* is the obscene chronicle of justices toward the body and voice of native peoples. Much of the sexual violence, torture, and dismemberment contained here seems to have moved beyond pain in any ordinary sense, and on this subject *Bearheart* and the victims are silent. (Armstrong 282)

There is a contradiction between the detailed description of the committed monstrosity and the silence of both the narrator and other characters about the suffering of the victims. Scarry adds that physical pain both resists and destroys language. "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). To produce pain, the body should be exposed to violence which causes language to malfunction and stop. Therefore, narrative enters the

realm of silence and escapes the violence of the language. Correspondingly, Slavoj Žižek points to the inherent violence in the language and describes how the process of naming things breaks the autonomy of the objects and deprives them of their true nature (61). The moments in the narrative that silence reigns, there is no language to break the autonomy of Native American identity. So the narrative can escape from the language's violence which entangles it. In silence the words which make Native American stuck and fixed exist no more, so silence provides an opportunity for coming over rigid definitions or "terminal creeds" and lays the grounds for the recreation of transformative and dynamic definitions.

Armstrong explains that Vizenor uses the body to resist the stereotypical representation of the Native Americans. In this respect, she says "Vizenor offers another possibility: resistance through comic violation, dismemberment, mutilation, and immolation of any ceremonial body he encounters" (267). Any character who sticks to "terminal creeds" is violently destroyed. One of these significant violent scenes is when the hunters ask Belladonna about Native American identity. When she presents cliché answers, they poison her with cookies.

"Wait a minute, hold on there," said a hunter with an orange beard. "Let me find something out here before you make me so different from the rest of the world . . . tell me about this Indian word you use, tell me which Indians are you talking about, or are you talking for all Indians . . . And if you are speaking for all Indians then how can there be truth in what you say?"

"Indians have their religion in common."

"What does Indian mean?"

[. . .]

"Indians are an invention," said the hunter with the beard. "You tell me that the invention is different than the rest of the world when it was the rest of the world that invented the Indian . . . An Indian is an Indian because he speaks and thinks and believes he is an Indian, but an Indian is nothing more than an invention . . . Are you speaking as an invention?" (Vizenor 195)

Vizenor directly shoves the plastic nature of Native American identity to the reader's face. Belladonna's blood is on her own hands because

she is unable to move beyond the rigidity and fixity of the word Indian. In this context, Rigel-Cellard offers:

Belladonna is her own victim, but she has also been previously the victim of a rape. The duality of meaning is expressed in the twin hood of the fetuses. Twins belong to many Native and non-Native myths, usually to signify the complementary duality of human nature and of the Creation. (107)

In *Bearheart*, almost every aspect of the story from its trickster narrator and characters to the trickster narrative is hybrid. The reader can glean no single meaning from *Bearheart*, for the story politically thwarts the readers' expectations in order to prevent the production of putrid static definitions. Vizenor lets different voices be heard in the carnival and dialogic atmosphere of the novel. Although his fiction, on the face of it, seems irrational and perverse, it has its own logic. Bakhtin explains that "during carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (7). Vizenor's narrative is also free and suggests neither progression nor closure as he constantly switches focalization and lets other characters tell their own stories even through their deliberate silence.

CONCLUSION

Bearheart is characterized by the barrage of violence it makes its readers face. One outstanding instance is Matchi Makwa's account of the fate of the tribal people that deals with the removal of the genital organs of the tribal people right before their death. Makwa's narrative similar to Bigfoot's and sister Willabelle's is both atrocious and grotesque. The emphasis on the genital organs which are observable in the violent and grotesque scenes of the novel degrades the characters' and the narrative's body to purify them from the assigned identity of Native Americanness. The collusion of violence and humor in *Bearheart* portrays how characters like Belladonna are destroyed because they are unable to see beyond readymade definitions of Native American identity. However, violence in *Bearheart* also assails the systems of law and language to enact a politics of freedom; it is at best an attempt to free characters and audience alike from any institutional belief or practice that deprives

them from living imaginatively. To this end, the novel creates an emotional bond with the readers. On the one hand, it borrows from oral narrative strategies to create intimacy between the narrative and the reader, so to offset the digressive quality of the novel which is constantly punctuated with violence and humor. On the other hand, readers are emotionally engaged with the transgressive violence of the narrative through its use of grotesque humor. While Bearheart narrates grotesquely exaggerated violent events, he attempts to normalize them, through the use of humor, both for the characters and the readers. His language is shockingly lewd and nude, transgressing any sense of normality or propriety. In its transgressive quality, however, it assails the readers' opiated imagination and helps liberate them from the constructed visions of the world; hence, they are involved and made complicit with a comparable experience of the violation and contravention the novel offers. This liberating mechanism, therefore, is set up in the novel by the concomitant employment of grotesque violence and humor.

The collaboration of grotesque violence and humor frees the Native American identity from both the biased belief systems that have imposed their own definitions on this concept and from a linguistic violence through which the belief systems function, relegating Native American identity to a prosthetic existence. Since this identity is prosthetic, the narrative breaks down the autonomy of its definition by introducing the terrifying monstrosity that characters commit on each other; a monstrosity that questions the very existence or propriety of any sense of collective human identity. The breakdown of discourse on identity formation penetrates the narrative as the characters often fall or are forced into silence about the agonizing pains and experiences they undergo. By making the language falter, the novel proposes that the definition-endowing quality of its language is questionable and implicitly suggests the need for a more dynamic, hybrid, and protean conceptions of Native-Americanness. Overall, the strategies of narration in *Bearheart* indicate a politics of excess in describing oddly violent scenes to let the readers revise their previously clichéd perceptions about who the Native Americans are and what they have experienced.

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