

## **SURVIVAL, RESISTANCE AND RESURGENCE: RECLAIMING OUR OWN ‘UTTERANCES’**

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*“We have stories as old as the great seas  
breaking through the chest,  
flying out the mouth,  
noisy tongues that were once silenced,  
all the oceans we contain coming to light.”* [Linda Hogan, *To Light*]

Native American critic, Vine Deloria, characterizes the work of native writers as presenting a “reflective statement of what it means and has meant to live in a present which is continually overwhelmed by the fantasies of others of the meanings of past events” (Deloria, 1985: i). In the trenches of the Native American literary movement in the US, the responses to what Gerald Vizenor (1994: 1-44) calls “simulations of dominance,” or the mis-tellings and the mis-representations of history, have appeared in many forms. Among other native critics, Louis Owens (1998, 2001) speaks of the diverse “strategies” of this poetic of contestation, pointing at the alternative aesthetics that native writers have formulated which offer alternative perceptions, and a rich counter-telling of the “manifest manners in literature”. Significantly, most critics seem to agree that this counter-telling not only leads to the recovery of a native people’s consciousness and cultural identity, but it rekindles, in all of us, a much needed radical questioning of our own ‘utterances’ and an awareness of the true and the very real power of the word.

For hundreds of years the Caribbean has been struggling with issues of identity. None of those struggles has been as deeply felt as those of the indigenous population. The recognition of Caribbean indigeneity has been perhaps one of the most debated themes in Atlantic World history and for centuries, the trope of the vanishing Indian has been a deeply implanted theme within all historical, literary and linguistic texts written about the region. Anthropologist Maximilian C. Forte (2005) relates this best in his paper entitled ‘Extinction: The Historical Trope of Anti-Indigeneity in the Caribbean’,

“For those of us who were taught, as a matter of routine, that indigenous peoples of the Caribbean have been extinct for the past five centuries, developments during the last three decades would have struck us as very surprising. Communities, organizations, and individuals in the contemporary

Caribbean and its diaspora are announcing their presence as indigenous peoples, as Amerindians, as Caribs, or Tainos, even while the dominant historiography has been that these populations were wiped out, save for a *few* ‘culturally diluted’ and ‘mixed race’ remnants.”

People had been living on the islands of the Caribbean for many generations before Europeans arrived. With great difficulty, their descendants have survived the five hundred years since Columbus landed and still live in the islands and surrounding mainland.

The objective of this paper is to focus on the diverse strategies of counter-telling in Native American writing and to apply and/or posture these philosophies towards indigenous identity and representation in the Caribbean, while also essaying and interjecting a Caribbean stream of consciousness into this much needed discourse. In this paper, I will explore the work of the following theorists: Edouard Glissant, Gerald Vizenor, Louis Owens and Frantz Fanon, with interjections from other Amerindian/Native American writers and scholars, in order to posture indigenous identity and representation in terms of Caribbean and Amerindian theory<sup>1</sup>.

This section will focus on Glissant’s definition of creolization, or “the unceasing process of transformation” (Glissant, 1989: 142) and how it may pertain to an indigenous ideology. According to Glissant, creolization is the process by which “cultures mix and produce something not only new but unpredictable”). This is significant, as many historians and anthropologists tend to sublimate the indigenous into the realm of either ‘pure and pristine’ (the *savage*) or simply mongrelized, i.e. creole, mixed-blood; the non-existent marginalized and subalterned entity that has earmarked indigenous people with the following terms - *extinct* and/or *re-invented*. Two important words to focus on in Glissant’s ideal of creolization are ‘*relation*’ and ‘*antillanité*’. The concept of ‘*relation*’ refers to a cultural process in which a group and/or society is in a state of constant metamorphosis. ‘*Antillanité*’ focuses on a commitment to self-discovery. Within these terms, Glissant presents his idea of opaque perception. In this idea, opacity permits a shift in the Western ethno-colonial gaze from a concern for authentic representation of indigeneity to a concern for collective expression and transformation. This is imperative, because an obsessive concern for authenticity often diverts (Glissant’s characterizes this type of ‘diversion’ as ‘trickster discourse’) attention away from the ongoing political struggles and transformation of indigenous people (and others). His notion of identity, as constructed in relation and not in isolation, is relevant to the discussion of Caribbean creolization. In his essay ‘Cross-cultural poetics’ Edouard Glissant writes,

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<sup>1</sup> I have included Amerindian critics and theorists as they can be utilized to introduce new ideologies into the Canon of Caribbean indigenous studies; ideologies that reflect indigenous thought, consciousness and discourse. This is an integral step in transforming a historically represented Afro-Caribbean field into a theory of representation by and for the indigenous.

“We say that a national literature emerges when a community, whose collective existence is called into question, tries to put together the reasons for its existence. ...Just as a community can constitute an independent state and nevertheless experience a profound form of cultural alienation, so an individual can proclaim that he wishes to regain his identity and yet suffer from a terminal inadequacy even in the way in which his cry is expressed.” (Glissant, 1989: 104-105)

Similarly, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice notes that “Autonomy of community and self-within-community – as opposed to postmodern individualism – requires at least two things to sustain it: a community from which memory is spoken, and a sovereignty of mind and body, both the body politic and the physical body” (Justice, 2004: 120). In *Red on Red*, Muskogee Creek/Cherokee scholar Craig S. Womack echoes Glissant’s sentiments making the connections between our literatures and our sovereignty explicit:

“Native literature, and Native literary criticism, written by Native authors, is part of sovereignty: Indian people exercising the right to present images of themselves and to discuss those images. Tribes recognizing their own extant literature, writing new ones, and asserting the right to explicate them, constitute a move toward nationhood...A key component of nationhood is a people’s idea of themselves, their imaginings 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 and gives sovereignty a meaning that is defined within the tribe rather than by external sources.” (Womack, 1999: 14).

371

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Also similar to Glissant’s view is that of Amerindian critic and theorist, Gerald Vizenor. In his essay ‘Postindian Warriors’ the opening section of his *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (1994), Vizenor, an Anishinaabe (Chippewa) critic, dissects the images of Native Americans usually presented in literature, history, and popular culture through the juxtaposition of cultural commentary with postmodern theory<sup>2</sup>. He shows that like others subjected to European colonialism, Native peoples have commonly been represented as ‘primitives’ lacking legitimate political structures and histories. Coining the term ‘survivance’ (a word produced from the words survival and resistance), which infuses survival with a more active sense of resistance, Vizenor turns the image of the Native from romanticized victim to a figure of strength and endurance: the result is what he calls the “postindian” or the postmodern Native person who has an awareness of and manipulates conventional images of the “Indian”. Vizenor urges Native people to become “postmodern warriors of simulations” and engages in “trickster

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<sup>2</sup> Vizenor mimics, as well as parodies, Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction; he also borrows Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulation, or the belief that in postmodern life, we are so far from real things and experiences we can only simulate them, not represent them. While Baudrillard finds simulation characteristic of post-modernity, Vizenor attempts to reclaim a sense of real Native peoples and cultures.

hermeneutics”, using invention in language and the shifting and contingent nature of meaning to replace simulations with a more valid “tribal Consciousness” (Vizenor, 1994: 1-44).

Vizenor’s critical analysis and/or counter-telling is what he calls “simulations of dominance”, or the mis-tellings and the mis-representations of history. One of the main instigators of this simulation of dominance is “manifest manners.” “Manifest manners” focuses on the way in which Native Americans have been identified, and or defined, by the colonizer. This mythic and/or romantic view of the savage is what has led to Natives being called *Indians*, a misnomer constructed by the colonizer in order to define us “others” into an acceptable category of being. Vizenor feels that this constructed identity based on the mythic vision of the colonizer, should be rejected by Natives and that we should reclaim our power and demonstrate our “survivalance.”

Also pertinent to this argument is the perspective of Cherokee/Choctaw scholar, Louis Owens. In his essay ‘As if an Indian Were Really an Indian’ Louis Owens discusses the results of the “other’s” input into the field of Native storytelling and culture. He speaks of them as inventions and focuses on how the Native has to overcome these inventions through “ousts of inventions”, or the culmination of an alternative aesthetic which can lead to the rekindling of cultural identity and Native consciousness. Owens also focuses on language as a tool to take back our own “utterances”, and gives voice to the experiences that we, as colonized people, have encountered; thus further strengthening our already considerable ability to recount our own stories and histories.

372

It is in this way that Vizenor and Owens intersect with the philosophies of Frantz Fanon. Vizenor’s “trickster hermeneutics”, the donning of the mask, can be seen as Fanon’s donning of the “white mask” in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Both are implements used for dealing with and/or countering the world of the colonizer. Whereas Fanon’s mask is subjugated towards the utilization of mimicry, or the desire to be at the same level as the colonizer, Vizenor’s mask is that of a trickster who feigns mimicry, by “playing” the *Indian*, in order to make his statement and/or point. Owens’ mask is that of determining cultural identity, his mixed-blood messages philosophy plays deeply into the chasm of who we, as a people, are today (the diffusion between Malcomson’s one drop of blood making one black vs. Pevar’s tribal mandates on blood quota, or the many drops of Native blood, to make an *Indian*) or, as Owens himself states:

“For Native Americans, the term ‘Indian’ is a deeply contested space, where authenticity must somehow be forged out of resistance to the ‘authentic’ representation. Vizenor astutely declares that the real *Indian* is the ‘absolute fake’...such simulations are the ‘absence of the tribal real’ since the simulated Native ‘Indian’ is a Euramerican invention. It is the hyperreal simulation that the Native must confront and contest while simultaneously recognizing that

only the simulation will be seen by most who look for Indianness. This is a dilemma made more difficult because the simulacrum, or ‘absolute fake’, is constructed out of the veneer of the ‘tribal real’” (Owens, 2001: 13).

All this being said, I would now like to segue into a discussion on nationality and language. National and/or cultural identity and language, discussed by both Vizenor and Owens in their analogies on Native writings, is also central in the philosophies of Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant. Whereas Fanon discusses the use of French to convey the feelings of the colonized on Martinique and Edouard Glissant focuses on the implementation of Creole to forge cultural identity and language in the Francophone Caribbean, Vizenor and Owens focus on the use of English as their weapon/tool to penetrate the misinterpretations brought forth by the colonizers in their analysis of the *Indian*, or, as Owens so aptly writes in *Mixed-Blood Messages*:

We humans have the ability to appropriate and liberate the ‘others’ discourse. Rather than merely reflecting back to him the masters own voice, we learn to make bare the burden of our own experience (Owens, 1998: xiii).

All four utilize ‘The Empire Writes Back’ strategy of dissolving the gray areas of ‘otherness’ and focusing on ways to interpret and revive the face that exists beneath the mask. Like Fanon and Glissant, Vizenor and Owens also focus on mimicry; Vizenor through the counter-antics of the trickster, Owens through the re-interpretation of Native and the usage of ‘utterances’, those words that must be preserved in order to re-call a national/cultural consciousness and more. All of these post-colonial theories culminate in the desire for a factual representation of a specific ethnic and/or cultural phenomenon.

Both Vizenor and Owens concentrate on ways in which the Native can take back their voice and reformulate their cultural power. Through ‘simulations of dominance’, or the re-interpretation of what it means to be Native (the factual realities of our existence today vs. the mythos formulations of the colonizer...we are NOT *Indians*), we can begin to redefine who *we* are according to our own directives; our own understanding; our own utterances. These strategies of counter-telling are ways in which we can re-formulate our vision of identity and representation. Garnette Joseph, in his article ‘Five Hundred Years of Indigenous Resistance’, writes:

“As they approach the future, the Caribs must engage in some deep reflection of the past. There must be some focus on how to survive in a rapidly changing environment. The thought of ‘celebrating’ Columbus and his dreadful journey brings pain and sorrow to the indigenous people as they reflect on the suffering endured by their forefathers. There is a feeling of having been cheated at every turn and of needing to put the conquest in proper perspective. The indigenous people believe that it is time the history books were rewritten to give an accurate depiction of their society. And they are prepared to continue the struggle against European domination.” (Joseph, 1997: 220).

In his Foreword to *Kalinago Myths: A Retelling*, Julius Green writes:

“There are those who ignore the significance of our distinct identity and encourage us to follow suit. Indeed, they would urge us to merge to the point of obliteration of ethnic identity although, at times, that unique identity does well to benefit our entire island economically; they minimize the contribution that we have made to the history and development of Dominica; and they prey on our weakness using diverse mechanisms that have never worked to our benefit. However, a recognition and espousal of the contribution that the Kalinago have made is foundational to the genuine development of the Country.” (Green: 5)

These Kalinago voices, along with those of the Caribs of St. Vincent, Trinidad, the Guianas, Belize and Honduras; the Arawak voices of the Locono of Trinidad and the resurgent Taino voices rising from Puerto Rico, The Dominican Republic, Cuba, and the United States, are good examples of how Vizenor and Owens’ Native theory can interconnect in order to enrich and define Amerindian culture in the Caribbean today. Having been colonized by the Western academy which claims theory as thoroughly Western, which has constructed all the rules by which the indigenous world has been theorized (or not theorized), indigenous voices have been silenced for far too long. Frantz Fanon’s call for the indigenous intellectual and artist to create a new literature, to work in the cause of constructing a national culture after liberation still stands as a challenge. Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes. It is not simply about giving an oral account or a genealogical naming of the land and the events which took place on it, but a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit: an *undeniable* and *urgent* right to reclaim our own utterances.

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