

PROCESSES OF SURVIVAL AND RESISTANCE:
INDIGENOUS SOLDIERS IN THE GREAT WAR IN JOSEPH BOYDEN'S
THREE DAY ROAD AND GERALD VIZENOR'S *BLUE RAVENS*

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ABSTRACT

Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* (2005) and Gerald Vizenor's *Blue Ravens* (2014) offer literary representations of the Great War combined with life narratives focusing on the personal experiences of Indigenous soldiers. The protagonists' lives on the reservations, which illustrate the experiences of racial discrimination and draw attention to power struggles against the White dominance, provide a representation of and a response to the experiences of Indigenous peoples in North America. The context of World War I and the Aboriginal contributions to American and Canadian wartime responses on European battlefields are used in the novels to take issue with the historically relevant changes. The research focus of this paper is to discuss two strategies of survival presented in Boyden's and Vizenor's novels, which enable the protagonists to process, understand, and overcome the trauma of war.

Keywords: World War I; Indigenous soldiers; trauma; survival; survivance.

1. Introduction

Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* (2005)¹ and Gerald Vizenor's *Blue Ravens* (2014) offer alternative perspectives to the literary representations of the Great War, which

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¹ I'm aware of the recent controversy over Joseph Boyden's Indigenous ancestry instigated by the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network reporter Jorge Barrera. At the heart of the controversy surrounding Boyden's heritage is the authenticity of his writing and his questionable role as a spokesperson on Indigenous issues. However, as the discussion continues in social media, my focus in this paper is primarily on the literary analysis and interpretation of the text of his novel.

focus on the personal experiences of Indigenous soldiers. By recognizing and championing the presence of marginal/marginalized groups and their desires to represent distinctive discourses, the narratives place emphasis on creating identities which affirm their cultural origins. The protagonists' lives on the reservations, which illustrate the experiences of racial discrimination and draw attention to power struggles against the White dominance, provide a representation of and a response to the experiences of Indigenous peoples in North America. The context of World War I and the Aboriginal contributions to American and Canadian wartime responses on European battlefields are used in the novels to take issue with the historically relevant changes, thereby demonstrating how individual people influence and, at the same time, are influenced by historically and socially structured powers. The research focus of this paper is to discuss two main strategies of survival presented in Boyden's and Vizenor's novels, which enable the protagonists to process, understand, and overcome the trauma of war. The focal point of Boyden's narrative is the recuperative power of traditional Native² wisdom – the combination of First Nations spiritual practices and beliefs helps the protagonist heal the trauma of war and attests to the spiritual resistance against the dominant culture's materialism and brutality. A different strategy is undertaken by Vizenor's protagonists, who find a way to confront the trauma of residential schools, institutionalized discrimination on the reservation, and the horrors of the Great War in the language of art: literature and painting respectively. Vizenor's transcultural vision transcends Indigenous practice and reaches out to Western culture.

The introduction of a parallel history of World War I reveals a problematic situation of the Native peoples within the social structure, drawing attention to their unstable citizenship status. The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed the struggle for Indian citizenship, as most Natives were still not considered U.S. citizens. Some of them, however, had already obtained citizenship and became subjected to federal, state, and local laws through the allotment process, which began in 1887 with passage of the Dawes General Allotment Act. Any land remaining was, however, available for public sale, which mostly benefited the white speculators. As Krouse claims: "The allotment policy was designed to eliminate tribalism and to promote individual Indian land ownership, thereby making Indians more like whites and capable of joining them as citizens" (2007: 10). The problem of citizenship returned together with the military draft: "Tribal Indians, that is Indians living as members of a tribe, are not citizens, and are not covered by the provisions of the Selective Service Act...The Indians should be

² My usage of the term "Native" is not to suggest that North American Indigenous Peoples form a culturally homogenous entity but that they must be viewed in relevance to the concrete social environment of a concrete group in a concrete historical situation. In order to avoid language that offends political sensibilities, I use the following terms: "Native", "Indigenous", "First Nations", and "Aboriginal" interchangeably.

advised of this, and that they can present the claim of exemption prepared for aliens, as they are to be considered such for the purpose of this act” (Vizenor 2014: 62). In spite of this overt declaration of institutionalized discrimination, “No native ‘aliens’ prepared an exemption, or at least no native boasted the claim of exemption from the draft on the White Earth Reservation. Younger Natives were ready for the adventure of combat, not for a passive alien exemption of service in the Great War in France” (Vizenor 2014: 62). As the Registration Cards noted the draftees’ height, marital status, color of eyes, and occupation, “[t]here was no designation for reservation or natives” (Vizenor 2014: 62). As Vizenor’s protagonist observes, “we may not have been considered citizens of the country because we lived on a federal reservation, but our distinct culture was apparently not relevant on the Registration Card for the Selective Service Act in Becker County” (Vizenor 2014: 62).

The Native draft opened up a discussion about the formation of segregated or integrated units: the “Red Progressives” and the Indian Rights Association resisted the proposals to segregate soldiers. Instead, they plainly argued in favor of integrated units and pointed out that “segregated units encouraged the maintenance of racial stereotypes, undermined Indian progress, and gave Native Americans an inferior social status” (Britten 1997: 44). On the other hand, the examples of racial discrimination were not uncommon because “many White recruits simply did not want to serve alongside visible minorities” (Talbot 2011: 100). Recruited as ordinary infantry soldiers, Native men served as scouts, marksmen, and snipers, whereas those who “had experience in nature and woodcraft were selected to serve in units to clear and construct roads” (Vizenor 2014: 68). “The War Department estimated that 17,313 Indians registered for the draft and 6,509, representing roughly 13 percent of all adult Indian men, were inducted. This did not include voluntary enlistment” (Barsh 1991: 277). The reasons for voluntary conscription were diverse: some followed family and friends, others were attracted by regular pay, especially because jobs were scarce on reservations and there was a lack of economic opportunities. A warrior ethic, which was still an important element of the male upbringing, allowed young Native men to show combat expertise. Likewise, handling weapons with great dexterity not only boosted their feelings of pride and self-respect but also garnered public respect. For young, single men joining the military forces was a chance to meet the representatives of other tribal groups, while going overseas was an opportunity to see the world outside the reservation. According to Susan Applegate Krouse, “participation in World War I was one way they chose to demonstrate their eagerness to defend their country and their ability to take control of their own affairs, without government supervision” (2007: 7). Military service had a huge impact on Native communities, providing young men with the experience of wage labor, whereas success in the military helped build their confidence and demonstrated that they were just as capable as their non-Aboriginal comrades.

2. Redressing indigenous history: Literary representations of trauma as cultural imperialism and a wound

Following Jeffrey Alexander's definition of cultural trauma, which locates it at the time "when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental ways" (2004: 1), one can identify not only a single event of the Great War but also the preceding history of oppression of Aboriginal groups in North America as falling into that category. Traumatic episodes in the history of the whole group have their direct bearing on the individual lives, thus demonstrating the interrelatedness between the two. Boyden's and Vizenor's narratives engage Native characters who stand for what has long been deemed borderline and negligible by the main stream, yet making these experiences vital components in the formation of Indigenous identities. Trauma, thus, is communicated through the events which refer to North American Aboriginal history, such as the struggle for survival under the colonial rule, fur trade, Indian residential schools, sexual abuse, racial and cultural discrimination, life on the reservation, the dominant position of the reservation agents, alcoholism, unemployment, and the collapse of a traditional way of life. Familiarizing the readers with the history of residential schools, the narratives show their detrimental effect on the Indigenous children's socialization, thus making their communal lives more challenging. A forced abandonment of the Native language and the compulsory adoption of English had a damaging effect on Native cultures, tribal relationships, and the connection to the land. The traditional Indigenous stories that are transmitted orally link one generation to the next, thereby preventing the erasure of collective memory. The abrupt disconnection of the speakers from their mother tongue, and an insistence on accepting the language of the colonial oppressors alienated the orators from their stories, likewise from their past. Outlawing the religious rituals, whose major component is the distinctive Native language, the colonizers offered Christianity as the only alternative. Furthermore, the demarcation of Aboriginal lands and the ratification of numerous treaties, whose main aim was to secure the need for the increased colonial settlement, resulted in their alienation from the Native land. The protagonists of Boyden's and Vizenor's novels signify the marginalized narratives, which do not only resist the privileging of Western European paradigms over the Indigenous ones but also exhibit careful attention to historical fact and cultural memory. Recreating in textual form the Indigenous past not only provides a platform to talk about Native versus White dichotomy but also facilitates the understanding of inter-tribal relations. Both writers perform an honoring ritual by recalling and redressing Indigenous history. The publication of contemporary works of literature featuring Aboriginal

protagonists, such as can be found in the discussed novels, erases the anxiety about “vanishing Indians”, whereas “wordarrows”, to use Vizenor’s term from his 1978 collection of stories, shot at the dominant narratives, remind the reading public of the existence of viable Indigenous cultures.

The manifestations of trauma as cultural imperialism have been demonstrated through narrative insights into the history of oppressive laws and discrimination of Indigenous groups in North America, whereas the trauma inflicted on the individual characters by the horrors of the Great War constitutes its further representation. Citing Visvis’s observation that “[o]ur understanding of trauma is generally predicated on two terms: *catastrophe* and *wound*” (2010: 227), one can distinguish *catastrophe* as referring to the Great War as the site of trauma, whereas the trope of *wound* signals its immediate and far-reaching effects depicted in the characterization of the protagonists. Unlike Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (1950: 295–391), which located traumatic memories in an unconscious psyche and viewed them as constantly being reworked by the unconscious mind, for Cathy Caruth trauma is a bodily concept: the “literal registration of an event... ‘engraving on the mind’” (1995: 152–153), which is outside the world of intention and meaning. Coalescing the above definitions, I argue that the literary representations of trauma in Boyden’s and Vizenor’s novels answer the claim to a culturally specific model for conceptualizing trauma, revealing it as a wound inflicted both upon the body and the mind of the protagonists. The claim, which is in accordance with the Aboriginal perception of an inseparable nature of both, and which draws from the holistic system of care developed by Aboriginal groups and incorporated to their cultures (Hale 2002: 127–129.) In her stimulating discussion of trauma in Boyden’s novel, Vikki Visvis analyses the figure of Windigo – “a cannibalistic human, monster, or spirit, informed in this context by Cree and Ojibway beliefs” (2010: 225) as a counter concept to Eurocentric theories of trauma, arguing that it promotes assumptions “inherent in Indigenous cultures, particularly the importance of dreams” (2010: 229). Visvis concludes: “The First World War is a traumatic event plus a colonial agency that, like the Windigo consumes, and, in this context, devours First Nations cultures and beliefs” (2010: 234). Invoking and combining the imagery of persistent and institutional discrimination against Indigenous peoples and the horrors of the First World War’s battlefields, both novels illustrate and explore the trope of trauma as a vital component of their narrative processes.

As both narratives traverse European battlegrounds during the Great War, describing the atrocities of war and their detrimental effect on human psyche, the protagonists must make sense of brutality and violence inherent in armed conflicts, if they want to survive. Common to any soldier’s experience are the symptoms of PTSD, such as the ones described by Vizenor’s protagonist Basile: “I was miserable almost every night, and could not escape the conjured stench of bodies and the ruins of war. Every sound in the dark cabin, the crack of beams,

tease of lonesome insects at the lantern, and the shadows, the menace of shadows, became the cues and traces of my war memories” (Vizenor 2014: 119). Sleeplessness, anxiety, intrusive memories, and depression accompany the protagonists, who try to alleviate the trauma and cope with the stress in order to regain the control of their lives. Xavier Bird, the protagonist of Boyden’s *Three Day Road*, resorts to traditional Native culture, in which he finds not only solace that enables him to come to terms with the traumatic past but also strength that allows him to resume his post-war life. The feeling of belonging and the help of his family, in the person of his aunt Niska – a Native healer, enables him to overcome morphine addiction – the aftermath of World War I.

Vizenor personalizes the experience of war, providing numerous examples of individual stories, together with the names, places, and dates: “by political omission our cousin enlisted at once in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces and served as a private in the Ontario Regiment in France. Private Hole in the Day was a distinguished native warrior in Canada and the United States. Sadly he was wounded, poisoned by mustard gas near Passchendaele in West Flanders, Belgium. He was a fancy dresser and world adventurer, and he died at the Canadian General Hospital in Montreal, Canada, on June 4, 1919” (Vizenor 2014: 61). Vizenor’s account is full of statistics, thus giving the proverbial cannon-fodder a human face:

Becker County lost more than fifty soldiers in the First World War, and five of the war dead, four soldiers, Charles Beaupré, Ignatius Vizenor, William Hole in the Day, Fred Casebeer, and one nurse, Ellanora Beaulieu, were natives from the same community on the White Earth Reservation... Father William Doyle, the Trench Priest, died in the Battle of Ypres on the very same day as our uncle Augustus. The priest was the chaplain for the Eighth Royal Irish Fusiliers and served soldiers in the trenches (Vizenor 2014: 61).

On the one hand, a long listing of names, places, and dates objectifies, and to a degree, escapes the uniqueness of an individual life, especially that it is narrated in the less personal third person that introduces an omniscient point of view. Yet, the inclusion of various war scenarios featuring Native soldiers avoids the hierarchisation of war experience, making it more representative of the diversity of that particular group. On the other hand, this narrative strategy individualizes the experience of war, making it appear authentic and more engaging. In consequence, when the threat is communicated directly, the readers are more likely to feel the stress of combat morphing into fear.

Neither Boyden nor Vizenor ventures beyond the familiar tropes of war’s brutality and human despair in their representations of the global conflict. Unlike Ross J. Wilson’s discussion of different representations of the First World War trauma in popular memory which challenges the visions of the devastated

landscape and human suffering with the focus on “the camaraderie, loyalty and determination present within the ranks”, what prevails in Boyden’s and Vizenor’s artistic visions is the “the rats, gas, mud and blood image of the war” (Wilson 2014: 43). Both narratives, therefore, cannot escape cruelty, as well as the inevitability of the casualties of war, Native and Non-Native alike, showing them in a detailed way: “the explosions dismembered the soldiers, and armies of rats ate the faces, eyes, ears, cheeks, and hands” (Vizenor 2014: 82). A realistic rendition emphasizes the horrors of war and conveys no acts of heroism or glory but only pain and suffering for its participants. According to Barsh’s estimates, the “[t]otal Indian participation was...probably 20 to 30 percent of adult Indian men, which compares favorably with the 15 percent of all adult American men who served in the war” (1991: 277). Barsh further calculates that “at least 5 percent of all Indian servicemen died in action, compared to 1 percent for the American Expeditionary Forces as a whole” (1991: 278).

The universality of literary war representations refers to common experiences of human pain and sorrow that war brings in its wake, whereas the storylines about the individual soldiers signal its private and personal character. Through the focus on individual characters, the portrayal of the Great War reiterates the “truth” that there is nothing noble about it but only “the horror of the war [and] the trauma that is communicated” (Wilson 2014: 46) through it. In between, there is always a question of ethics, such as the one formulated by Boyden’s narrator, Xavier Bird: “We all fight on two fronts, the one facing the enemy, the one facing what we do to the enemy” (Boyden 2005: 327). Reciprocity seems to be an accepted feature of armed conflicts, albeit its moral aspect calls for reexamination of the rationale behind the rule. Hence, the Native soldiers are portrayed both as victims and perpetrators of violence. War is depicted as an industrialized conflict, which is accountable not only for human loss but also for the destruction of natural environment, as both authors pay attention to this element of the narrative, emphasizing its importance on the global scene. Xavier Bird observes: “the earth is so wrecked with shells and poison gas that nothing good will ever grow again” (Boyden 2005: 59). Whereas the first thing a healer Misaabi asks Basile Hudon Beaulieu on his return to the reservation is “how the birds and animals had survived the war in France” (Vizenor 2014: 119). The metaphor of war is repeated on many levels of the narratives and does not only refer to the military losses of the Great War, but also the Indigenous people’s fight against the government’s assimilative politics and for the preservation of their language and traditions, linking “the Canada of the time of World War I with contemporary Canada and its struggle with her colonial heritage” (Teichler 2014: 248).

Both novels take the Great War as a point of departure for their narratives. In a manner of cultural resistance, the literary focus on Aboriginal soldiers is an attempt to reclaim and recognize their place in official Canadian and American history.

“Natives of the fur trade served to save one of the nations of their ancestors”, stresses Basile, and adds: “France established many war memorials, but never a memorial to honor the natives of the fur trade” (Vizenor 2014: 14). On the one hand, Boyden’s and Vizenor’s narratives transcend the Indigenous experience and stress the importance of tradition to a nation’s history by creating a shared experience of the Great War. The loyalty and bravery of the Indigenous soldiers facilitate their identification with the national character, which, according to Jonathan Vance, in popular Canadian consciousness is evocative of “national heroism, victory and romantic individualism” (1997: 5–6). On the other hand, they highlight the history of Aboriginal soldiers whose contribution has largely been downplayed or omitted from the official history. After the armistice of 1918, Aboriginal soldiers returned to the same patronizing societies, whose governments failed to reward them properly and justly for their services in the war. Vizenor’s narrator formulates the accusation: “We returned to a federal occupation on the reservation. Our return to the reservation was neither peace nor the end of the war. The native sense of chance and presence on the reservation had always been a casualty of the civil war on native liberty” (2014: 107). Since their war efforts had little effect on their political and economic status back home, the literary representations give them visibility, which facilitates survival.

3. A return to Native roots: Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road*

Boyden’s novel follows the story of two Native friends, Xavier Bird and Elijah Whiskeyjack, who voluntarily enlist in the armed forces when the Dominion of Canada joins World War I. Their traumatic war account from the battlefields of France and Belgium is complemented by the voice of Niska – a Canadian Oji-Cree medicine woman and Xavier’s aunt, who challenges westernization and erosion of Indigenous culture by upholding a traditional lifestyle. The experience of war generates different responses in each protagonist: while Xavier realizes the futility of war sacrifices and begins to question his role in the global conflict, Elijah embraces death and bloodlust, finding his personal aim to become the best sniper ever. By refuting compassion and accepting cold-blooded cruelty, in the story represented by an evil spirit *windigo*, Elijah’s fate is sealed. For Xavier, it is Niska – the last of a line of healers and diviners – who helps her nephew to come to terms with the war trauma by feeding him broth along with the stories of her past and of the larger past of their people. These activities are performed as acts of human endurance and survival, providing for Xavier a pillar to lean on when the white man’s version of the world disrupts his order of things.

An important factor responsible for a different fate of both protagonists is the residential school experience, which stripped Native children of their language and culture but did not provide any viable alternative. Raised in a residential

school, Elijah is cut off from his traditional animistic religion and exposed to Christianity, in which natural world is devoid of spirit, thus allowing man to exploit it to fit his own needs: “No Indian religion for [me]” (Boyden 2005: 127), he later claims. McLeod comments on the damaging consequences of the residential school experience on Native people:

Instead of being taught by the old people in the traditional context, children were being taught in an alien environment which stripped them of their dignity; it was a process of cultural genocide and spiritual exile. Once put away in both an ideological and spatial sense, many children never came “home”: instead they spent their lives ensnared in alcoholism and other destructive behaviors (2001: 28).

Unlike Xavier, who escapes the trauma of a boarding school and remains connected to his culture through the person of his aunt, Elijah becomes susceptible to Western influences. Lacking a spiritual footing and support of his people, he dons an English accent and falls easy prey to deceptive values, which promise him acceptance and recognition for his worth. The price for his physical survival is a renunciation of cultural resistance that would enable him to contest and combat the dominant power.

The context of the Great War allows the author to explore the ways in which the value of Native soldiers is shifting according to the white commanders’ expectations. Both Boyden and Vizenor emphasize and explore Native capabilities as scouts since, as Vizenor’s protagonist claims, white officers are “convinced that stealth was in our blood, a native trait and natural sense of direction even on a dark and rainy night in a strange place” (Vizenor 2014: 78), adding “Natives were selected as scouts more than other soldiers because of romantic sentiments, and, of course, because the missions very were risky” (Vizenor 2014: 78). The White perception of the Native threat or promise has always waxed and waned, based on how willing to cooperate and assimilate they were: they are seen as brutish warmongers and savage hunters or the pitiable victims of the changing world. On the one hand, the commanders willingly use their hunting skills in combat, assign to them dangerous tasks, and later praise them for excellence. At that point, their savagery and cold-bloodedness is not only welcome but encouraged as long as they continue to be useful in combat. By demonstrating not only physical but also mental toughness, they inadvertently valorize and mythologize violence, thus subscribing to the stereotype of a savage Native warrior. Initially selected on the merit of fierceness and bravery, then praised for marksmanship and efficiency in battle, they are scorned for savagery and barbarity once their cruelty becomes uncomfortable or no longer desired. Notably, both narratives communicate ambivalence toward the Native warfare that implies criticism and the denigration of Native traditions whenever they resist or fight against the European colonization or myth making in the Western Hemisphere.

Boyden employs hunting as a metaphor for warfare, but the hunt also expresses its complexity both as a practical and spiritual pursuit. Hunting was always accompanied by strict religious rituals that aimed at ensuring the balance between a spiritual world and a physical one. Being able to make use of the familiar experience in a hostile world helps Xavier and Elijah to survive: “to be the hunter and not the hunted, that will keep me alive. This law is the same law as in the bush. Turn fear and panic into the sharp blade of survival” (Boyden 2005: 31). For Native soldiers, showing hunting skills is also a way of gaining approval of fellow soldiers. However, unlike combat soldiers, Native hunters apologize to and ask pardon of the animal for taking its life: they give thanks for the opportunity to feed their family and offer prayers so that death is given a meaning. They talk about the gift of animals who would allow themselves to be taken, thereby acquiescing to the universal system whose elements are mutually dependent. Since the emphasis is put not on the hunter’s skills but on the gift that he is about to receive, Native hunters do not boast about their kill but remain humble, asserting their responsibility for the natural world. From the Western perspective, however, hunting evokes and perpetuates a stereotypical image of an Aboriginal man as a bloodthirsty and ignoble savage. This biased representation uses the affinity to nature to stress the protagonist’s connection to the primitive and uncivilized. In Boyden’s narrative, the Great War is a manifestation of *windigo* in modern times – a disruption of life, which undermines spiritually peaceful existence. It represents destructive appetite, no longer for human flesh but for devastation of natural environment and Indigenous cultures. The ruthless war is a break of history in a similar way in which Elijah’s ethical trespassing signifies the disruption of Native traditions. The war is representative of a nihilistic view of the Western world that fortifies the notion of techno-scientific advancement and rationality against traditional Native spirituality and environmental awareness, demonstrating that the increase in power has been achieved at the expense of estrangement from the natural world.

The idea of hunting is appropriated in Boyden’s novel to show how its meaning may be subverted by the Western values that serve their makeshift agenda. The depiction of warfare during the Great War becomes a travesty of survival in the wild, with soldiers in the trenches mocking the traditional ways of Aboriginal hunters. In a naive pursuit of acceptance, Elijah denigrates traditional Native spirituality and its customs, hoping this tactic will give him credibility outside the Native world. Taking scalps, which was a traditional proof of a warrior’s prowess, in his case comes to represent a barbaric activity that is devoid of spiritual depth and condemned by the “civilized” world. Once the boundary between violence and barbarism is crossed, Elijah has compromised his moral integrity and endangered his sense of survival. His brutal exploits disrupt natural harmony and balance, allowing the evil to spread. The childhood spent in a residential school run by Catholic nuns, absence of familial and communal support, a forceful substitution

of the Native language for English, sexual abuse, and repeated incidents of racial discrimination contribute to the destabilization of his self. Exposure to the White world brings his addiction to morphine as analogy to the corrupting effect of alcohol on Native people. Moreover, the Western values that he adopts are inconsistent, so this schizophrenic attitude results in his moral confusion. He becomes what Hanna Teichler calls “a hybrid figure, a person that exists at the in-between of various cultural forces”, wondering “whether the narrative seeks to convey that an existence at intersections is doomed to fail, hence suggest[ing] that hybridity is not viable” (2014: 246). As much as Xavier and his aunt Niska represent the continuation of the Cree tradition, Elijah’s cultural hybridity testifies to its porous nature in the face of a morally compromised Western world.

Niska’s healing ceremonies not only maintain the connection to the past but also provide a springboard for new frameworks of Indigenous being to appear. Niska, who refuses to live on the reservation and pursues a traditional, self-sustainable life style in the bush, represents the restorative power of family and tradition. Hanna Teichler expresses a similar claim that “Niska’s narrative draws a specific image of Canada, that of a home to wounded Xavier and a place where life can be regained, if one returns to nature and kinship” (2014: 247). Niska is the guardian of inherited practices and a story-teller, like her father who was the last great talker in the clan. Assisting Xavier in his attempts at resisting assimilation and on his road to recovery, she feeds him not only food but also stories about their past – a form of spiritual nourishment that gives him strength and keeps him alive. Thus, a Native woman healer signifies the importance of oral lore, which facilitates cultural recuperation and which has long been the source of empowerment for her people. The importance of narrative memory is illuminated in interconnectedness between the speaker and the listener, whereas humor, which is also the central part of Vizenor’s notion of survivance, is used as a coping mechanism and a strategy of addressing complicated and painful concerns related to the question of daily survival. Boyden places his narrative in a broader context with story-telling as a uniting and homecoming measure: “‘To be home’ means to dwell within the landscape of the familiar, a landscape of collective memories” (McLeod 2001: 17). Storytelling functions as a vehicle for cultural transmission, which is especially important when the blood ties are broken – both Boyden’s and Vizenor’s protagonists are strangers in blood but spiritual brothers by choice. Hence, they offer a way to fill in a discursive space that has been disrupted by colonial presence.

Not only does Xavier resist the dominant oppression and survives the Great War but also manages to escape the need to compromise his own traditional ethics. At the same time, his refusal of victimization in favor of endurance and resistance undermines victim-perpetrator dynamics of oppression. McCall agrees that “Xavier’s strength emerges from his ability to retreat: from the English

language and its conventions of privileging hierarchy; from the military culture of discipline and punish; from British/Euro-Canadian cultural norms of etiquette, competitiveness, and cruelty; and ultimately from contact with non-Cree peoples, institutions, and ways of life as he takes the “three day road” into the bush with Niska” (2013: 71–72). The return to and an embrace of Indigenous values allow him to maintain not only his cultural identity but also self-respect, whereas finding solace in nature underlies the importance of Native connection to land. Xavier’s physical and spiritual journey from the battlefields of the Great War to his homeland, from morphine addiction to staying alive enables him to recover a meaningful sense of his own experiences and productively integrate his story within the broader network of Native traditions.

4. An art of survival: Gerald Vizenor’s *Blue Ravens*

In the introduction to *Native Liberty. Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance* (2009), Gerald Vizenor explains his capacious concept of survivance: “The nature of survivance creates a sense of narrative resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihilism, and victimry. Native survivance is an active sense of presence over historical absence, the dominance of cultural simulations, and manifest manners” (2009: 2). Coalescing survival with resistance, Vizenor avoids simplistic binary categorizing, such as Native/colonial and oppressive/oppressed, and challenges dualistic notions of power and victimhood, dominance and subjugation, resistance and submission. Exhibiting a dialogical nature, the stories of survival are acts of response and resistance to cultural separatism, linear causality, and monotheism. By retelling old and creating new stories, Native authors “create a sense of presence” (Vizenor 2009: 3) and continuance. In Vizenor’s view, the acts of survivance, which draw on Native culture, may be modified according to the current needs and may involve a wide range of behavior from active resistance to running away: “The nature of survivance is unmistakable in native songs, stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions, customs, and clearly observable in narrative sentiments of resistance, and in personal attributes such as the native humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage” (Vizenor 2009: 85). John D. Miles concludes: “*survivance* is a practice that emerges out of individual rhetorical acts and not only in response to a dominant force. Acts of *survivance* create a presence that upsets and unravels discursive control over Native people” (2011: 41).

Vizenor writes back to the common cultural representations of Native people by locating them in, what he calls, the “postindian” category. In *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* he explains: “The postindian warriors bear their own simulations and revisions to contend with manifest manners, the ‘authentic’ summaries of ethnology, and the curse of racialism and modernism in the ruins of

representation” (1994: 5). In David J. Carlson words: “[t]he essence of survivance for Vizenor, then, is the act of nurturing “postindian” creation of counternarratives and the employment of reading practices that clear away colonial simulations to create a space for the recreation of the real, the sovereign right of indigenous people to determine how or how much, they are *seen* by others” (2011: 25). Robert A. Lee in his discussion about “Native Postmodern?” enumerates the advantages of the postmodern modes of Indigenous representation: “Reflexivity, the readiness to turn preemptive imagery against itself, the fragmentation and bricolage, and always the polyphonic voicing supply not only means but a situating narrative distance to dismantle what Gerald Vizenor calls in lowercase and italics *the indian*” (2015b: 74). By comprising a mixture of postmodern themes of representation and reflexive language, the postmodern literary aesthetic opens up new ways of reading Native fiction, other than as “ethnic” or “minority” literature. The fictionalization of postmodern theories is directed against labeling of Native authors as ethnic writers, in its stereotypical sense. It also helps to widen the audience for tribal literature; however, the efficacy of Vizenor’s representation is dependent on how well non-Native audience, which lives in the postmodern world, will be able to grasp the Native world view.

In line with the above argument, David J. Carlson’s claims that “[p]ostindian discourse parodically represents the “Indian” as a way of contesting colonialist discourses and their images of tribal people. Those parodic representations have transformative power, both for the postindian subject and the colonizing subject” (2011: 22). Having a storywriter and a visionary painter as two protagonists, Vizenor’s narrative combines Indigenous traditions with an artistic expression to negotiate modern Native identities. The language of art allows the protagonists to rediscover the integrity of the world, which was shattered by war and, on a local scale, which was marked by multiple forms of oppression and discrimination. In Registration Cards, most Native draftees were listed as “laborers,” so the choice of artistic occupations for Indigenous characters signals a departure from their stereotypical portrayal. Just like microhistorians tend to focus on “outliers—those individuals who did not follow the paths of their average fellow countryman” (Magnusson 2006); a successful writer and a painter defy the image of an uneducated and uncultured resident of a reservation, which is located in a remote part of the world. Created as narratives of resistance, Native stories of survivance defy the stereotypical portrayal of Native culture, as seen in cultural simulations, and attest to its viability in the world of cultural dominance. The application of the “postindian” frame of reference promotes internal diversity of the Native groups and individualism in the group’s constituency, allowing the shift in the power differentials between the groups. Additionally, the choice of Paris as a venue for creative exploits finds Native characters and their culture at the center of the world’s post-World War I artistic scene.

Blue Ravens is a story of two brothers who are the members of the Anishinaabe people, called the Chippewa by Euro-Americans, Basile Hudson Beaulieu, the narrator and writer, and Aloysius, an artist known for his paintings and carvings of totemic blue ravens. Vizenor's narrative traces their lives on the White Earth Reservation of Minnesota, and their service as scouts in the American Expeditionary Force in France, during the bloody 1918 Battle of Argonne and Meuse Offensive. On coming back to the reservation, the brothers realize that they do not fit in anymore with the company of "patchwork shamans, pretenders and timber grifters" (Vizenor 2014: 122). War experiences and contacts with Bohemian Paris alter the protagonists' perceptions of their homeland, which they begin to notice as only "the echo of native traditions...the reservation would never be enough to cope with the world or to envision the new and wild cosmopolitan world of exotic art, literature, music, and vaudeville at the Orpheum Theatre" (Vizenor 2014: 121). However, no sorrow is expressed for neglected traditions, as they claim that "[t]he world of creative art and literature was [their] revolution, [their] sense of native presence and sanctuary" (Vizenor 2014: 156). The novel concludes with their decision to leave the reservation and seek their fortunes as expatriates in Paris.

Vizenor's novel presents Native cultures as analogous to the Western European ones by showing the development of the schooling system and press on reservations. Augustus Hudon Beaulieu, the protagonist's uncle, presents national and international news articles in the *Tomahawk*, an independent weekly newspaper published on the White Earth Reservation, thus refuting criticism of the Native isolation and a general lack of interest in the world affairs. A similar claim is repeated in Paris where "Marie was astounded to learn that natives actually published newspapers. The French romance of natives and nature excluded the possibility of any cosmopolitan experiences in the world. She could not believe that we had actually read international news stories on the reservation and sold papers at a train station" (Vizenor 2014: 101). Even though Native teachers were rarely hired to teach at residential schools, federal agents brought teachers from Massachusetts or Connecticut: "We learned much later that natives on the reservation were more literate than the general population of new immigrants, and natives read more newspapers because the federal government established schools on reservations. Federal assimilation policies forced most native children to learn how to read and write long before national compulsory education" (Vizenor 2014: 19). Basile later boasts that "the officers encouraged [him] to teach illiterate soldiers how to read and write. Some soldiers thought that was a racial contradiction, that a backward reservation native would teach others how to write" (Vizenor 2014: 65). A Native affinity to a global culture is expressed by Basile's love for wine: "My choice of wine was a serious deviation on the reservation. The big boosters of white lightning were scored as more manly, an ancient pretense, and wine drinkers were teased as pompous

outsiders... Yes, the fur trade created a new culture of outsiders with traces of a wine culture. France and the war only increased my deviation from the reservation of white lightning drinkers” (Vizenor 2014: 115). The narrator also stresses his kinship with other underprivileged groups in American society, “Jews, natives, newcomers, veterans, and socialists were hardly ever hired without connections in the City” (Vizenor 2014: 125).

One of the major tenets of Vizenor’s novel is the advancement of transcultural and transnational interactions, in which the Indigenous worldview is presented as equally valid to the Eurocentric Western perspective. The colonizer’s narrative is subverted, thus allowing the characters to retain Indigenous identity through subject matter of their art (blue ravens and Native stories) and become part of a larger Western European art scene. By associations with literary figures (Mark Twain and Oscar Wilde), the Japanese artist (Yamada Baske), Homer’s *Odyssey*, the trader Odysseus Walker Young, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and a Union general who later became president of the United States, the lives of two Indigenous brothers are placed within a cosmopolitan milieu, resisting the mentality of victimization. The memories of such famous figures as Alfred Dreyfus, Pablo Picasso, Joyce Kilmer, Georges Braque, Guillaume Apollinaire, Georges Danton, Tecumseh, Little Wolf, and Crazy Horse represent reference to authority and reinforce the transnational nature of the novel, in which two Native American brothers are presented as equal participants of the international cultural scene. According to Elaine Jahner, Vizenor’s “epigraphs are recognitions of intellectual kinship, an extended family of thinkers all of whom have arrived more or less independently at a position that insists on showing how dangerous taking anything for granted can be” (1985: 64). The allusions to popular Parisian sites, such as Pont des Arts, Café du Dôme, Les Deux Magots, Café du Départ, and Le Chemin du Montparnasse, do not only give travel-guide-like authenticity to the narrative but also locate two Aboriginal men at the center of the Western artistic world. Both protagonists find themselves at ease while dealing with European painters and their art, thus affirming their own rightful place among the great artists of the present day. The city of Paris, called the City of Lights, with its expatriates, artists, and philosophers becomes synonymous with free and unrestrained artistic expression, which is contrasted with the federal occupation on the reservation. Moreover, the performance of artistic creation champions Native’s active presence in urban spaces, extending a recognized notion of their connection to natural environment and land. On the other hand, Vizenor warns against the acts of cultural theft and appropriation of Native culture:

Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, the national ethnographic museum of African, South American, and North American Indian art and cultural objects. Most of the cultural objects had been stolen, seized as colonial possessions, and some

obtained by trade. Many French explorers had returned with cultural booty, the sovereign rights of godly conquests and a covetous civilization. The Canadian National Railway gave the museum huge native totem poles. The ancestral poles were from British Columbia. What right does a railroad have to give away native cultural property? (Vizenor 2014: 104).

The author presents Native stories as avant-garde art, highlighting their sense of adventure, irony, and integrity: “Divine and patriotic stories were never trustworthy in the face of a fierce enemy in war, so the only stories that created a sense of presence were about ingenious tricksters who fractured and outwitted the contradictions of tragic monotheism with guile, creature transformations, and with gestures of humane irony. Native tricksters created avant-garde art” (Vizenor 2014: 168). In an essay devoted to George Morrison, Vizenor explains the connections of Native art to modernism: “Native artists were expressionists and modernists by continental barter, tricky conversions, innovations, transformation, natural reason, survivance, and by nature” (2006: 646), adding that “Natives practiced a natural art that anticipated the party of romanticism and modernism by emotive, personal, creative expressions in stories, images, and objects of wood, bone, hide, bark, and stone” (2006: 647).

Art becomes the medium through which the war trauma might be alleviated: “We were steadfast brothers on the road of lonesome warriors, a native artist and writer ready to transmute the desolation of war with blue ravens and poetic scenes of a scary civilization and native liberty” (Vizenor 2014: 13). Patricia Haseltine claims that “the crow for Vizenor is a dominant image of freedom and transcendence over the concerns of the world, as well as, paradoxically, the means to survive in that world” (1985: 36). Art provides visibility for artists and their works, and blue ravens become “totems of creation and liberty” (Vizenor 2014: 17). Writing and painting are presented as two modes of expression that allow to maintain the balance between the inner and outer world, between the weight of tradition and the attraction of the modern. Artistic imagination allows the protagonists to create distance to the real world, a form of alternative reality, which allows to envision “many other places, marvelous railroad cities. Places without government teachers, federal agents, mission priests, or reservations” (Vizenor 2014: 17). In Vizenor’s novel, art has no borders, which testifies to its viability that is not grounded in any specific context. The assertion that art can be understood equally well on a Native American reservation and in a European metropolis signals the language of art as a *lingua franca* that bridges cultures and nations. Being part of the contemporary art scene offers the Native protagonists a way to escape the image of the “vanishing race” or the “disappearing Indian,” which echoed the loss of wilderness and the triumph of civilization in 1900 America (Krouse 2007: 6).

Aloysius’s paintings of the totemic blue ravens and Basile’s stories are acts of survivance, whose aim is “to create a sense of presence with the perceptions of

motion, a native presence in the waves of memory, and in the transience of shadows” (Vizenor 2014: 247). Thus, Vizenor heeds Steiner’s claim that “the potential of survivance [is] in art. The lyric, the painting, the sonata endure beyond the life-span of the maker and our own” (1986: 102). Likewise, Native myths survive in the poetic imagination, in which the meaning is made accessible through the play of historical, cultural, and artistic relationships. The potential of aesthetic meaning, which is distinctive and at the same time alludes to a prolific inventory of Native American lore, infers the presence of a discourse that helps them to evade the romance of the primitive and sentiments of victimry through irony and humor.

Rather than importing their memories back home, where they might add to the creation of the myth of a glorious past and the Indigenous involvement in the US military, Vizenor’s protagonists, contrary to Boyden’s, refuse such a participation and withhold their experiences from the post-war discourse in America. Even if they come back home after the Great War, they undermine both the reservation’s and the US’s status as the center by refusing to stay there permanently. Going back to Europe allows them to escape the familiar rhetoric of oppression and victimhood, thus opening them to new experiences in a different milieu. Through their mobility, they do not only undermine the dominant discourse but also expand the discussion of Native sovereignty by not assigning it to any specific territory, yet gesturing toward the fluidity in Native tradition. As Jeanne Sokolowski observes, “[t]he intellectual sovereignty Vizenor advocates is devoted to a liberation of consciousness more than to” (2010: 727) political activism. “Vizenor aims to explore how people, places, and cultures outside of the United States can operate as potential sources for the creative energy needed for survival, rather than...positing nation and reservation as the inevitable sources for inspiration and spiritual sustenance” (Sokolowski 2010: 729). In Vizenor’s novel, historical, literary, and artistic acts of sharing through personal narratives combine Native heritage with the postmodern outlook, working against ethnic reductionism and widening historical vision.

Vizenor’s novel demonstrates that there does not have to be an essential connection between traditional culture and creative art – in Robert A. Lee’s words: “De-essentialization of genre as of tribe becomes all” (Lee 2015b: 76). Nor does the identity of an artist should decide the meaning or determine the merit of his or her art. Asked about the presumed duty of a Native artist, Vizenor’s narrator remarks: “I observed that most visitors to the gallery expected a native artist to represent some traditional scene, or at least depict a trace of native culture or inheritance in the portrayal of the river scenes” (Vizenor 2014:122). An artist, the narrative posits, can be liberated from ancestral expectations by his creative imagination, which, however, does not mean cutting himself or herself off his/her cultural roots but rather consciously drawing from the past and rejecting

ideological subtexts. In line with the above argument, Vizenor's narrative provides a critique of one model of identity, arguing that an artistic approach that is not tribal centered defies the validity of one and only template of authenticity (see the discussion about Joseph Boyden's ancestry). Instead, it conveys a notion of cosmopolitan and postnational sovereignty, which yet remains to be rooted in traditional tribal values. Such claim, I believe, applies not only to North American Indigenous Groups featured in the discussed novels but to all originally Indigenous cultures.

5. Final remarks

Three Day Road and *Blue Ravens* present alternative perspectives on the history of Indigenous involvement in the Great War and, in doing so, affirm Native ways of storytelling, which challenge the dominant narratives. The two plots demonstrate different strategies of survival, by means of which the characters refuse to become the victims of an unjust exercise of power or the passive recipients of fate. Boyden advocates recuperation in Native tribal cultures as a pathway to meaningful existence in the postwar reality, whereas Vizenor leads his protagonists beyond national and cultural borders in search for a viable response to Western dominance. Both narratives address intra-group power relations, showing different patterns of behaviour, as well as their relationship to outside discourse represented by values of White/Eurocentric culture.

Boyden's more traditional approach to the representation of Indigenous characters is challenged by Vizenor's criticism about how the dominant culture "invented" and perpetuated the image of the "indian" that falsifies the experience of American Indians and exploits their culture for political and commercial gains. He further strongly criticizes "Native commercial fiction," in which "the themes and style of the narratives focus more on tragic victimry, the popular notions of terminal traditions and cultures" (Vizenor 2010: 44), rather than on "tropisms of survivance" (Vizenor 2010: 44). Even if we heed Vizenor's criticism, one cannot help but notice that what he does is to redefine a Native image with a new simulation that uses the vehicle of art as a way to escape the rhetoric of oppression and victimry, thereby demonstrating the influence of postmodern and poststructuralist literary theories on a genre of Native American fiction. The question, however, arises whether such affinity is not just another simulation of the similar kind that the author is so avidly trying to refute.

Vizenor's and Boyden's narratives formulate and discuss contemporary Indigenous identities: hence, they may be seen as literary responses to earlier novels, such as N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), the narratives which involve protagonists who are also veterans but of World War II, returning home physically and

mentally bruised. By offering an attempt to find fresh and original ways of applying old concepts to contemporary Indigenous North American scholarship, Boyden's and Vizenor's works of fiction represent their culture's viability to meet the changing world and assert the Aboriginal writers' active presence in public discourse. Moreover, both authors contribute to the literary mainstream of American literature since their concerns find resonance in other ethnic literatures confronted with the dominant values, in which the loss of traditions and culture are of utmost value. With Boyden focusing his narrative solely on the Indigenous experience, the question arises, however, whether to promote the insularity of Native experience as uniquely autonomous and highlight the tribal political and legal sovereignty as an alternative to assimilationism; the approach which inexorably distances this literature from the comparisons to the experiences of other ethnic groups. Or, rather follow Vizenor's vision and explore Indigenous fiction in the context of transculturality, creating a dynamic of shared and diverging discourses that inform each other.

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