Gerald Vizenor. *Treaty Shirts: October 2034—A Familiar Treatise on the White Earth Nation*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016. 125 pp. 978-0-8195-7628-6

http://www.upne.com/0819576286.html

On the companion website for his new novel, *Treaty Shirts*, Gerald Vizenor notes that the book's subtitle is intended to signal that each of its linked narratives offers a distinct view of Native politics and governance. In suggesting further that the novel is at least partly an allegory (one that alludes to what would be his own one hundredth birthday in 2034), Vizenor also hints at other, more personal connotations. To be "familiar" with something is know it through long association, to be in intimate or in close relationship with it. For Vizenor, of course, a key index of the closeness of any relationship or the significance of any subject or story, is one's willingness and ability to "tease" it, to test its limits and expand its possibilities. There is probably no recent subject that Vizenor is more invested in and better positioned to tease than the White Earth Constitution, with its vexed (and currently thwarted) progress toward implementation. Taking up this theme, *Treaty Shirts* is part roman à clef, part satire, and part political treatise, emerging in the context of profound uncertainty about the current direction of tribal governance. In a novel that embeds complex political theorization in a narrative displaying his characteristic spirit of invention, intertextuality, and play, Vizenor probes the very meaning of constitutionalism, not just for White Earth, but for other contemporary indigenous communities as well.

Readers familiar with the text of the White Earth Constitution, and with Vizenor's earlier writings on that text (both fictional and non-fictional), will recognize that heterogeneity and heteroglossia are central to his views regarding ideal forms of contemporary native polities. Reflecting this core commitment, Vizenor structures *Treaty Shirts* as a sequence of recursive meditations by seven different narrators, all of whom have been exiled from White Earth after the termination of the nation through an act of congressional plenary power. In each chapter of the book we circle back temporally and repeat the moment of treaty abrogation and constitutional dissolution, rehearsing the build up to moment of exile. Only at end of book do we move forward a bit, in narrative terms. In this respect, it becomes clear that the novel is a vehicle for thinking about different strategies for ensuring the survivance of an indigenous polity, and about moments of transition and transformation of that polity into new forms. The book challenges us, in this regard, to look beyond the apparent failure of particular decolonizing strategies and consider the imaginative possibilities revealed, or perhaps engendered, by those setbacks. As one of the exiles, Savage Love, notes "You can't be exiled from liberty, from motion. Resuming a state of motion is what makes exile into a presence, rather than an absence—an assertion of liberty in motion" (52.

While the use of an episodic and circular plot and a rapidly shifting cast of characters is hardly an unusual technique in Vizenor's fiction, the level of commitment here to the gaps produced through the use of shifting third person limited point of view is perhaps a bit of a departure. Through this narrative approach, Vizenor signals to the reader that he is not necessarily trying to reconcile the theoretical tensions regarding the legacy of the White Earth Constitution and the fate of the White Earth polity that emerge through the varied reflections of his point of view characters. Rather he seems to be promoting what Richard Rorty (who is referenced in the text)

has characterized as the central importance of irony in contemporary political thought. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty defines an ironist as someone who fulfills the following three conditions: "(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that arguments phrased in her current vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve those doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself " (Rorty 73). Unwilling to invest in a priori conceptual certainty or absolutes, Rorty's ironist therefore uses dialectics as a preferred form of argument. The ironist sets about re-describing objects or events, often in neologistic terms, "with the hope that by the time she has finished using old words new senses or introducing brand-new words, people will no longer ask questions in the old words" (78). In this respect, Rorty's understanding of irony (one shared in certain ways by Vizenor) is as an open-ended process of linguistic and conceptual transformation.

Vizenor's protagonists embody many of the characteristics of Rorty's ironist, always resisting "terminal creeds" and consistently reworking their discourses and revisiting their memories of political experiences. Where Vizenor departs from Rorty, perhaps, is in extending the ironic mode from the private and into the public sphere, or rather, in denying the existence of such a split. Vizenor's work has always attended to the important implications of irony in the realms of law and politics; this is one reason that irony stands as a explicitly protected form of expression in the White Earth Constitution. Not surprisingly, then, a significant part Vizenor's project in *Treaty Shirts* is to "ironize" the White Earth Constitution, imagining its paradoxical ability to continue functioning both after having been abrogated unilaterally by the U.S. government and becoming deterritorialized, transformed into the charter of a diasporic group of Anishinaabeg exiles. Suggesting the absurdity and contradiction of the idea of being exiled from a terminated nation is just one facet of the Vizenor's subtle examination of these complex political ideas. On the novel's companion site, Vizenor describes *Treaty Shirts* as an "ironic declaration" that the ethos of the White Earth Constitution "is not determined by territorial boundaries." In this respect, he signals that the book can be read as an ironist's attempt to indigenize the very meaning of a *constitution* and to re-frame the present impass over the ratification and implementation of a particular, political document as part of a much longer historical process of transformation.

The seven exiles/point of view characters of *Treaty Shirts* (identified through their nicknames) are Archive, Moby Dick, Savage Love, Gichi Noodin, Hole in the Storm, Waasese, and Justice Molly Crèche. Together, they embody a range of potential imaginative strategies for resisting colonial power structures, critiquing what Vizenor terms "casino corruption," and ensuring that the ethos of White Earth Constitution will continue to serve its utopian function in shaping a living polity. The first and last narrator, a poet, novelist, and the great nephew of Clement Beaulieu (Vizenor's alter ego in other works), Archive is a repository of memory (historical, political, legal, and literary), all of which he constantly reworks in a spirit of Derridean play. Bearing a nickname given to him by the "tradition fascists" (Vizenor's critical term for those tribal nationalists caught up in their own orthodoxies and reductive forms of identity politics), Moby Dick espouses a form of indigenous modernism, which he articulates while teasing the memories of famous explorers. Moby Dick's other primary distinguishing characteristic is his

great compassion, which he pointedly extends towards other "deformed fish," despite the fact that this ethos renders him the target of shaming by other members of the community. Savage Love, an unpublished, experimental novelist linked to Samuel Beckett, trains mongrel irony dogs, thus recalling facets of Vizenor's "postindian" trickster discourse and its resistance problematic identity poses. And filling out our list, we have Gichi Noodin (the popular voice of Panic Radio), Hole in the Storm (an avant-garde painter and blood relative of Dogroy Beaulieu, the protagonist of Vizenor's earlier novel *Shrouds of White Earth*), Waasese (a laser holographer whose aesthetic recalls in some ways the Anishinaabe painter David Bradley's biting form of indigenous pop art), and an innovative legal thinker, Justice Molly Crèche (whose courtroom becomes a space for the recognition of new totems and totemic relationships, and the critique of various forms of repression or subversion of those relationships—particularly on the part of the tradition fascists).

Through the series of chapters exploring the perspectives of these exiles, we encounter varied assertions of the importance of art and the central role of stories in the survivance of indigenous forms of governance. This, too, represents an implicit argument structuring the novel, one that is tied to its suggestive re-definition of indigenous constitutionalism. As the book progresses, the exiles' stories suggest a number of key political insights: (1) the idea that sovereignty exists only in its assertion--in other words, that sovereignty is real only insofar as it is "performed"; (2) that a pivot to transnational, and transmotional, models is an important tactic in face of the nation-state centered structures of U.S. colonialism; and (3) that indigenous governance must blend contemporary structures with traditional systems of knowledge, in the way the White Earth Constitution engages with the Anishinaabe concept of *mino-bimaadiziwin*. These ideas underpin some of the most provocative arguments voiced by characters in the novel, arguments that often seems to suggest that the "people" we perform ourselves to be, through things like written constitutions, cannot truly be bound either by territory or the legal forms/structures of the colonizer. In this respect, some might argue that the White Earth Constitution itself was/is simply an initial step (though perhaps a necessary one) toward the realization of what Vizenor likes to call "continental liberty," and a limited and provisional instantiation of a native political presence that U.S. settler colonialism only believes it can erase.

In the spirit of ironic provisionality and open reflection, and also in the spirit of traditional storytelling, Vizenor does not take a clear position on the competing political claims running through the novel. Savage Love, for example, seems somewhat dismissive of the White Earth Constitution, viewing it as compromised from the very start:

> The constitution was never a presence, only a collection of promissory notes and abstract articles, but those ratified egalitarian words have always been an absence, beholden to the territorial borders and jurisdiction provided by the treaty of 1867, and continued with the plenary power favors of the United States Congress.
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> The abrogation of the constitution was the start, not the end, not the absence and not the creation of a fake presence. The actual story of the constitution started with termination, the abrogration, not the delegate ratification or referendum by native citizens…The actual story of the constitution started with the exiles. (51).

In contrast to this view, we have Archive, the only character who is given two chapters in which he is the focal point (and thus perhaps is the figure who comes closest to expressing an authorial viewpoint). Archive emphasizes the continuity of indigenous peoplehood, a spirit of relationship and governance that makes itself manifest in different forms—treaties, constitutions, and other forms of stories--over historical time. It is Archive who introduces the 1701 Great Peace of Montreal (between the governor of New France and 1300 representatives of over forty tribal nations) as a recurrent motif in the novel. That treaty (both a text and event) is an embodiment of continental liberty that led to sixty years of peace. Even if it stands as a positive example of the potential for the kind of mutual recognition that we sometime index through the concept of sovereignty, however, the Great Peace remains provisional and equivocal. Tied to the history of the Beaver Wars and the dissemination of the fur trade throughout the lifeways of indigenous communities, this treaty also validated the "decimation of totemic animals," something not to be forgiven or erased (18). Archive insinuates that the ongoing stories of Anishinaabe governance and sovereignty must come to grips with the full, problematic nature of the colonial past, and with the native role in that past. New totems may emerge, but they cannot overwrite this history entirely.

Archive also introduces us to the eponymous treaty shirts, which function both as allegorical symbols within the book and as vehicles for metafictive reflection. Initially created by some of the delegates to the White Earth constitutional convention, these unwashed shirts, worn at conferences and legislative sessions, are intended to serve as a kind of talismanic ward. In much the same way that the protective power of the Ghost Shirts worn by the Lakota in the nineteenth century was revealed to be partial, however, the treaty shirts function in an equivocal way, particularly to the extent that they come to embody for some a static faith in fixed legal forms (forms which the novel suggests can be undone or abrogated). One detects complex irony in Archive's comment that "stories of the exiles in *Treaty Shirts* were eternal" in the way articles in constitutions always have meaning (14). This is, of course, true in certain respects, but only when one penetrates through the fixed forms of governance to the deeper stories defining the people that flesh out these forms. Creation stories are visionary, Archive notes, and thus are not concerned with "metes and bounds" (14). A naïve faith in the permanence and stability of time-bound expressions of indigenous peoplehood (expressions like the White Earth Constitution itself), become in Archive's perspective, precarious. If, on the other hand, one invests in the idea that stories are the most fundamental and enduring form of government, one can work with and through a specific constitutional text without ever losing sight of the centrality of the political presence that is made manifest through it. An awareness of that presence, a faith in its persistence, and a willingness to work for its survivance, is, perhaps, the kind of "treaty shirt" that can provide the most effective shield in difficult times. It may be with this in mind that Archive emphasizes the (fictional) creation of the White Earth Continental Congress at the same moment when the White Earth Constitution was (fictionally) certified. Why create a body whose typical purpose would be to *create* a constitution at precisely the point when a constitution would appear to many people to be complete? Perhaps, through Archive, Vizenor is suggesting that the goal of indigenous politics (in contrast with the politics of settler-colonial states like the U.S.) isn't to write and deploy stable governing documents, but rather to continually realize a spirit of self-constitution and engage in ongoing nation building. Perhaps, to produce a full discourse of what many would today call sovereignty (but which another generation may name differently), the best approach is to celebrate and draw upon the full content of the indigenous political

archive, an archive that now includes an innovative novel of ideas by the inimitable storier, Gerald Vizenor.

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Works Cited

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