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Author(s): Nora Barry

Source: *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Fall 1993, Series 2, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Fall 1993), pp. 13-22

Published by: University of Nebraska Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/20736747>

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Nora Barry

Manabozho, the Anishinabe (Ojibwa/Chippewa) trickster, enters a dwelling through "a mat of scalps" to meet the gambler, "a curious looking being" who is "almost round in shape." Hanging in his wigwam are the hands of those who lost their lives in games of chance. Yet Manabozho laughingly plays with this sinister being as they toss the figures of the four ages of man in a dish game. The gambler wins three tosses of the figures, who all remain standing:

But one chance remained, upon which depended the destiny of *manabozho* and the salvation of the *anishinabe* people. He was not frightened, and when the *nita ataged* prepared to make the final shake, *manabozho* drew near and when the dish came down on the ground he made a whistle on the wind, as in surprise, and the figures fell. *Manabozho* then seized the dish saying: *it is now my turn, should I win you must die.* (Summary and quotation are taken from the retelling of Theodore Beaulieu's version by Gerald Vizenor in *anishinabe adisokan: Tales of the People* 147-49)¹

The myth of the gambler occurs in Native American traditions as a test for a trickster and/or culture hero, who must win the game in order for the tribe or something valuable to it to survive. All of the gambler's victims must wager their lives, and Gerald Vizenor's contemporary texts imply that this mortal game is still being played.

Indeed, on an everyday level, games of chance are endemic to Native American cultures with 382 pages of games of chance described by Stewart Culin in *Games of the North American Indians*. He points out that many of the games he records were "played ceremonially," often including music and dance as accompaniment, and are mentioned in several origin myths (32-34). Dish games, in which carved figures

are tossed, and the moccasin game, where players try to track a playing piece, are familiar to Vizenor's readers and described as part of several cultures by Culin (65-67, 339-45). Nor are games of chance a thing of the past, although they may have lost their ceremonial function, as Seminole and other tribal bingo games as well as the apparent success of the Pequot's Foxwood Casino in rural Connecticut attest.

Vizenor's texts reflect the mythic, ceremonial, as well as secular aspects of games of chance connected often with the gambler figure. Although his work is associated most often with Trickster, variations on the gambler story loom as a constant threat to the trickster's ability to "balance the forces of good and evil through good humor in the urban world" (*Wordarrows* 30). In Vizenor's vision the gambler would destroy the comic, yet sacred, survival strategies his texts celebrate. If the woodland trickster is a "comic trope; a universal language game" (*The Trickster of Liberty* ix-x), then the mythic gambler is a potentially tragic trope in Vizenor's language game, a threat to, but also a test of, balance for the compassionate trickster.

Although the gambler appears in Vizenor's texts through very different narrative strategies, the myth represents in all of the texts a struggle against spirit-killing absolutes, what Vizenor calls "terminal creeds." When narrative chance finds certain characters facing the gambling test, they survive because of an undogmatic, even casual, adherence to rituals that reflect tribal values. Yet narrative chance as random event appears as quite positive and reflects what Louis Owens calls the "infinite proliferation of possibility" (*Other Destinies* 234). Chance brings together an evolving, not static, world of ritual with the postmodern world of possibility. Vizenor sees the postmodern condition as "an invitation to narrative chance in a new language game . . ." (*Narrative Chance* 4). Indeed, in works such as *Dead Voices*, he rejects the "romantic revisions of the tribal past" and associates his heroine Bagese with "tribal chance" (6). Bagese lives her life through a wanaki game and becomes bear, beaver, squirrel, crow, flea, praying mantis, or trickster with the turn of a card (17).

Vizenor refers directly to gambling and indirectly to the gambler in several texts. In *Earthdivers*, Father Berald One is accused of losing money for the tribe through meddling with the outcome of bingo. However, he plays for tribal men and women who "were responsible for the care of others" (155). He wins through a variation on tribal vision when he pictures "the numbers and letters in his mind and concentrate[s] on the numbers to complete a row in favor of the person he chose to win" (155). Also, Slyboots Brown, one of a family of tricksters in *The Trickster of Liberty*, makes a fortune with a game called *tribe*—a name adapted to avoid a confrontation with the

government, but obviously a form of bingo. Through this game, Slyboots gains a college scholarship and the financial betterment of his community.

Bingo can have dubious results, however. In *Crossbloods*, bingo earned millions for a small tribal community near Red Wing, Minnesota. Yet Vizenor, in his journalistic mode, notes that:

The enormous cash returns, according to some critics, have attracted organized crime. Behind the wild cash and instant fiscal power in tribal communities, a serious concern has been voiced by several scholars; should tests of tribal sovereignties be tied to games of chance? (19-20)

Is the mythic gambler in charge of bingo? Or is the mob the gambler? Or is the game the economic and entrepreneurial answer to tribal ills? Vizenor leaves the questions open. However, while bingo as chance might be open to scholarly or journalistic criticism, when played through ritual (Father Berald One) and for generosity (Berald One and Slyboots), gambling and chance are positive forces.

Gerald Vizenor uses the gambler myth directly and often in many of his texts. In *The People Named the Chippewa*, he adds dramatic details to Theodore Beaulieu's version when he tells how Manabozho ignores his grandmother's warnings against "the great gambler who has never been beaten in his game and who lives beyond the realm of darkness" (4). However, Trickster travels through this hellish underworld (*People* 4) where he hears "the groans and hisses and yells of countless fiends gloating over their many victims of sin and shame . . . and he knew that this was the place where the great gambler had abandoned the spirits of his victims who had lost the game" (5). When he meets the gambler and defeats him on the fourth toss by "making a teasing whistle on the wind" (6), the tribes are saved temporarily from losing their spirit to the land of darkness, for "the trickster had stopped evil for a moment in a game" (6). Now Manabozho will toss and, should the figures remain standing, the gambler will lose his life. Vizenor ends the story as Manabozho "cracks the dish on the earth" (6).

In Vizenor's texts the game is never finished and neverending. He makes this clear in his autobiography, *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors*, when he retells a portion of the traditional story but ends at the beginning of the game (27). He then says that his father, Clement William Vizenor, who was murdered in Minneapolis, "lost the game with the evil gambler and did not return from the cities" (27). Later in the autobiography, Vizenor retells the complete story of Manabozho and the evil gambler to the point of the

last toss but adds, "that game, the four ages of man, continues to be played with evil gamblers in the cities" (180).

An example of the gambler's urban presence occurs in *Wordarrows*, when Laurel Hole In The Day comes for aid to tribal advocate Clement Beaulieu, who finds her a landlord: ". . . a despicable overweight slumlord who smoked stout cigars, the reincarnation of the evil gambler from the tribal past, [who] agreed to provide a six-month lease . . ." (51). Laurel's dreams evaporate in the gritty realities of urban life and she returns to the reservation. Her confrontation with the reincarnation of the gambler is not the immediate cause of her retreat but is representative of the many confrontations that lead her back to a tribal, and open, if difficult, world—in other words to "tribal chance."

Vizenor's most extensive direct representation of and variation on the gambler myth appears in *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (previously titled *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*). Although the gambler episode in the novel is only one of many tests for Proude Cedarfair, the pilgrims who travel with him, and their animal helpers, this confrontation is narratively and philosophically at the center of Vizenor's text. Vizenor does not retell the traditional story here but instead creates a fully realized modern equivalent of the evil gambler in the character of Sir Cecil Staples, who:

. . . dreams in themes of great rivers dark and deep. Coiled stoutwhite on a leather chair behind his heart shaped desk he is dressed in a shortsleeved tan uniform. Small silver birds are pinned to the epaulets on his shirt. He wears a translucent obsidian pendant on a beaded chain and a diamond ring on his little finger. His bald head, marked with dark pigmentation like tracks from small birds, droops forward on his chest. His upper lip twitches like that of a sleeping desert animal. (101)

Echoes of the myth are apparent here. The traditional gambler has a door of scalp; the cut off hands of his victims decorate the wigwam. Sir Cecil has two skeletons on his wall "near the entrance," "their white-bones touching in fleshless passion" (101). He is associated with realms of darkness yet appears round and white like the figure in the myth. But Vizenor's description also associates Sir Cecil with contemporary images of the military, with the accoutrements of a pimp or a drug lord, as well as endowing him with the name of an English aristocrat. Metaphorically and physically, he also bears a resemblance to Joseph Conrad's corrupt, empirical culture hero Kurtz with his bald and "bony head" who appears as "an animated image of death carved out of old ivory" (*Heart of Darkness* 59). Like Kurtz, Sir Cecil

presumably hoards, not ivory, but that most essential of all commodities to the industrial world—gasoline.

Sir Cecil is a corrupted trickster, what Trickster could become through greed and through lack of tribal values. He possesses trickster qualities in his creation of many identities for himself. Stolen as a child, he is encouraged by his stepmother in guiltless murder and incest as well as in aristocratic pretensions. He is, like Trickster, a wanderer who finds his truest identity in tricking people, but he does not trick to liberate or to balance good and evil through humor. Yet he is a necessary figure because Proude/Manabozho is tested by him. In Vizenor's novel, Sir Cecil and the other characters are given free and independent voice. As Maureen Keady says, "on the whole the Gambler's philosophy is utterly perverse, but within it there are kernels of truth" (62) about guilt-making family, corrupt government, and terminal creeds. Sir Cecil reminds us that *chance* means all the possibilities that the compassionate trickster must face.

In order to play the traditional game, the pilgrims find themselves embroiled in choosing a good gambler to confront Sir Cecil and lose life or gain the promise of gasoline, but Proude Cedarfair, the trickster/culture hero of the novel, says "chances are terminal creeds" (111). As Owens sees this and other episodes in the novel, "Chance, random event, would deny the responsibility of individuals for the world they inhabit, a denial not part of the traditional tribal world view" (*Narrative Chance* 147). Possibilities remain open as the pilgrims base their choice on an elaborate word game won by Lilith Mae, who becomes the good gambler yet who "did not know the rituals of spiritual balance and power" (116). Lilith Mae wins the second round against the gambler "driven with a perfect power"; however, she "took personal pleasure in winning and lost her place in the energies of sacred time" (118). She succumbs to fear and loses the ceremonial moment and the game.

Proude Cedarfair is left to save the pilgrims by playing with the gambler. Entering the trailer, he smells "The pungent odor of false civilizations, foolish terminal creeds and the bare visions of death. Living smells sweet and gives other lives breath. Death has the smell of cities and machines and plastics" (120). As Culin notes about games of chance among North American Indians, the games "appear to be played ceremonially, as pleasing to the gods, with the object of securing fertility, causing rain, giving and prolonging life, expelling demons, or curing sickness" (34). Alone with Sir Cecil, Proude ceremonially faces "eastward. He smiled and roared in a low bear voice at evil" (131). In Proude's confrontation with the gambler, Vizenor appears to allude to the sacred Ojibway rituals of the Midewiwin (Ruoff 67).

Manabozho, with whom Proude is parallel in this variation on the myth, is associated with the origins of the Midewiwin for he was sent "with the gift of medicine" (Johnston 80, Coleman 58) to the Anishanabeg by Kitche Manitou and remains the principal figure in the Great Medicine Lodge (Coleman 56). In *Ojibway Heritage*, Basil Johnston describes initiation into the four orders of the Midewiwin. During each initiation, the candidate is met by four bears "emblematic of all that is good in life" (Johnston 86). In each succeeding initiation, the candidate is obstructed by various malevolent spirits (reminiscent of the "coiled" gambler in *Bearheart*). The initiation is also a test of whether the candidate is on the correct path in life as he makes four journeys, analogous to the four stages of life (parallel to the four figures in the gambler's dish game), around the "Midewigun before gaining admittance into the inner sanctum. On and along the way he must not falter and yield to forces of evil" (86).

When he and Proude toss the figures representing the four ages of man, the gambler serves as an obstruction similar to those in the ceremony. He would tie himself to Proude through chance:

At the end, the end of all games, when we both have the power to balance the world and raise the four directions, we will find a new game because we are after all bound to chance. . . . Evil will still be the winner because nothing changes when good and evil are tied in a strange balance. (*Bearheart* 131)

Sir Cecil also claims that he and Proude are equals "at this game of good and evil" (132). But Proude will not accept an equality, a common vision, a "power adverse to living" (132); he will not accept the gambler's voice as his. He argues that "Death is not the opposite of living, but you are the opposite of living" (132). This association of life and death is apparent in the initiation to the Fourth Order of the Midewiwin, when the candidate intones, "I come / To die. / I come / For life." The members respond, "It is easy to die. / It is hard to live" (Johnston 92). When Sir Cecil Staples picks up the dish for the third and final toss, "confident that good and evil were in a strange balance," like Manabozho, Proude makes "a teasing whistle on the wind," the four figures fall, and the evil gambler must die (132). Vizenor's variations on the gambler myth always include the wind motif, associating his protagonists clearly with Manabozho, whose mother was impregnated by wind, and, in some versions of his life, Manabozho is the east wind or helps finish off the world through blowing on sand.²

The certainty of the gambler's death in *Bearheart* shifts the emphasis of the myth. There is no fourth round eternally caught in narrative openness when Proude/Manabozho might win or lose.

Proude's association with bears, who appear prominently in the Midewiwin ceremonies, which include the priest and the candidate impersonating bears (Dewdney 116), as well as his association with Manabozho's whistle on the wind, make this confrontation with the gambler and with chance highly ritualized to show Proude Cedarfair's real powers to transform life.

Most of Proude's fellow pilgrims do not have his power, indirectly associated with breaking through barriers in the Midewiwin ceremonies. The death that the Gambler represents lives on to take the lives of those characters who bow to "terminal creeds" (Keady 63). At the end of the novel, few of the pilgrims have survived to make the ascent, the metamorphosis into the Fourth World. But Proude Cedarfair and Inawa Biwide "flew with vision bears ha ha ha haaa from the window on the perfect light into the fourth world" (243). Also, Proude's wife, Rosina, follows the animal helpers, the clown crows and luminescent mongrel Pure Gumption, "to the top of the north mesa where the sacred road led to rainbows and the sunrise" where Rosina "found bear tracks in the snow" (245). Hereafter, Rosina is associated with the Pueblo stories of Changing Woman and vision bears as the mythology of the woodlands and the mythology of the deserts meet.

The Heirs of Columbus provides Vizenor's most elaborate variation on the gambler motif when a handsome blond wiindigoo takes on the role of the gambler. In Anishinabe stories a wiindigoo is an icy cannibal monster associated with starving in winter (Barnouw 120, Dewdney 124, Landes 13). In Vizenor's variation, the wiindigoo cannot be beaten in a moccasin game and his winning will destroy all humans and leave only robots and the wiindigoo gambler.

The demon wiindigoo insists that "The tribe is a game, the children are a game, but evil and fear are chances, and nothing in the world is more real than the moccasin game. . . . This is your last chance to save the game and the real" (21). The tribal players are saved by an ice woman who blows a cold wind—a variation on the whistling on the wind motif—and freezes the wiindigoo as he makes his last move. She holds the wiindigoo and the accoutrements of the game in the back of her cave (22) until he is unfrozen by government agents. While the heirs of Columbus and their new world at Point Assinika seem doomed, the wiindigoo withdraws over the threat of a war herb, associated with the Lakota mystic Black Elk, and revealed to Stone Columbus in a dream. Here Vizenor uses variations on the tribal rituals of dream/vision and herbal medicines to outwit the gambler figure.

The wiindigoo insists that the game never ends (183) and that no chance is his last chance (180) when Vizenor leaves his text, once again, open ended. As "The children danced on the marina, and their wounds were healed once more in a moccasin game with demons"

(183), one is reminded that children are particularly talented at destroying a wiindigoo (Barnouw 129). The "whistling on the wind" motif appears as a tune from the *New World Symphony* by Antonin Dvorak when Vizenor asserts the power of old and new world "winds" to create balance. Also, the moccasin game is accompanied traditionally by ceremonial drumming and singing (Culin 339). Combining the wiindigoo and gambler figures in a new variation on traditional myths and rituals reflects the evolution of traditional texts and traditional ceremonies. Vizenor presents the social and spiritual cannibalism of the dominant culture as it intersects with these new variations on tribal ritual and chance.

Even in the most postmodern of Native American texts, ongoing and always renewable narrative traditions and tribal rituals remain powerful. Gerald Vizenor creates worlds where traditional myths and everyday reality are interwoven in new variations. In his work the mythic process is a part of that everyday reality; it is simultaneous with it in ways similar to the vertical chronotope Mikhail Bakhtin envisions in chivalric romance where one must see ". . . this entire world as simultaneous" (*Dialogic Imagination* 157). However, in Vizenor's texts, mythic reality is always in the process of evolving: it is never finished; it is not an absolute. The myth of the gambler used as a direct text, as an indirect subtext, or as a variation on the traditional materials creates the evolving simultaneity of mythic and everyday realities and establishes a test of balance. Even though Vizenor's trickster novels are comic and satiric, the gambler is there to remind us that the comic text might deconstruct itself at any time through narrative chance to become tragic. Characters who face the gambler must take risks, must submit to narrative chance; however, through variations on tribal rituals, they often restore, *momentarily*, the balance of good and evil.

Notes

¹Another version of the Chippewa gambler story can be found in Radin and Reagan (61-62). The gambler figure appears also in the Southwest. See Franz Boas' *Keresan Texts* (76-82, 253) and Frank Hamilton Cushing's *Zuni Folk Tales* (385-97). *Diné Bahane'* includes a gambling god "descended among the Pueblos" (Zolbrod 99f). Also out of the Pueblo tradition, Leslie Marmon Silko retells a great gambler story in *Ceremony* (170-76).

²Radin and Reagan note that wind impregnates Manabozho's mother (107) and associate him with the east wind (84). Ruth Landes describes Manabozho

as being created by winds out of the body of Mother Earth's daughter (24). Sister Bernard Coleman says that the four corners of wind killed the trickster's mother (63).

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