

Gerald Vizenor, born in 1934, is a member of the Minnesota Chippewa tribe. He is presently teaching as a professor of Native American literature in the Ethnic Studies Department of the University of California, Berkeley. The range of Gerald Vizenor's literary achievements is extremely broad. He has written not only books on the history of his tribe—among these *The People Named the Chippewa* (1984)—but also works of narrative fiction, literary criticism, and many collections of poetry, among these, several volumes of Haiku poems. His fifth novel, *Dead Voices: Natural Agonies in the New World*, was published in 1992. For his script of the movie *Harold of Orange*, Gerald Vizenor received the Film-in-the-Cities National Screenwriting Award. The film itself received the award of Best Film at the San Francisco American Indian Film Festival. Gerald Vizenor's autobiography, *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors*, was published in 1990.

In his narrative fiction, Gerald Vizenor deals above all with a variety of aspects of Native American existence between the reservation and the city. Narrative irony and the dissolution of traditional genre conventions in his works have earned him the reputation of being the most postmodern among contemporary Native American writers.

KL: To begin with, let me ask you some sort of standard question. How would you define yourself as a writer? Do you feel primarily an ethnic writer, a North American writer, an American writer, or an universal or cosmopolitan writer?

gv: There are overlapping categories of any identity, and some of them are contradictory. If I could touch on the contradiction first: Trying to reimagine a cultural voice, a tribal consciousness, a connection in my life to the imagination and the experiences in the past, to give myself and that past some meaning surely makes me, proudly in fact, a Native American Indian writer. But if I were to choose politically a category of identity as a writer I would choose an international, postcolonial literary consciousness. And I say that politically because I think that contemporary Native American writers, even traditional writers, even the traditional storytellers, have more in common with postcolonial literary experience than with American literature. That's because there is still an interest in creating a new canon, you know, a new definition of American literature. And I think Native American writers have much more in common and can benefit more intellectually, emotionally, and politically by identifying on an international, postcolonial literary experience, as there isn't any canon there yet. I assume the end of colonialism; otherwise we are talking paracolonial.

KL: I think we will come back to the question of identity later. Let me first ask a question referring to the function of literature according to your opinion. In an interview published in *MELUS* in 1981 you said that you want to educate your readers.

gv: Yeah.

KL: Do you think that satirical indirectness can meet these didactic intentions, or are you running the risk of being misunderstood?

gv: Oh, no matter what I did, I would run the risk of being

misunderstood. Simply, I'll make it more complex, but *simply* I would be misunderstood because I would feel inadequate if I satisfied a bourgeois consumer literary market. Mythic satire is indirect. I would feel inadequate otherwise. I have no interest in writing to that consumer interest. So there are two ways that I feel I must educate readers. One is that I try to discover and express in written form what I feel is closer to a literary consciousness of an oral culture, the shadows of a tribal worldview. Now, that can't be done—oral to written—but I make an effort to draw some philosophical values and perceptions of experience, differences in worldview, into writing. For one thing, just one example is motivation. It's a Western literary preoccupation for bourgeois markets that characters must be developed descriptively in such a way that they fit into a recognizable social, cultural class. And then they must be motivated in some way for the comforts of the reader to identify and then realize the experience or be trapped in the experience. Native American stories, for the most part, didn't develop characters and didn't have to motivate them. The action alone was enough to give meaning to the story. I try to play part of that, as if there were oral shadows in the silence of the written moral. Now, in written form that appears sometimes to be episodic and disconnected or a contradiction, or someone would say, "Why do I care about this character?" My interest is not that people care so much about the class definitions of the character but that they care about the action and the experiences that result from such action. Or the contradictions that arise from it.

So that's part of what I think is an "education," and then the second part is "misunderstood." I don't know about that. I can't anticipate who an audience might be and what an audience will take pleasure in. I can say that one of the most difficult books I wrote, *Bearheart*, has this constant and rather steady sort of underground readership. Now, I take real pleasure in that, and none among those readers has said to me they don't understand. So the people who tell me they don't understand—if they do, and not many people do—are looking for escape literature; they're looking for a formula literature. This is exactly I think why—this is

not a fault—but this is exactly why Tony Hillerman is so popular, you know, even with many Native Americans. He's not particularly an artistic writer; he's a skilled formula writer. And he has a very interesting theme, and he develops the characters, develops the scenes, motivates people, and then resolves it. And it's a very nice genre: escape literature mystery. It's perfectly set up for film. I suppose I could go on to say why would someone bother writing literature if it's so much like film. Why not just write the film? Anyway, I don't think my books could even end up in films. So I can take pleasure in that whatever it is I choose to do in imagination is in the language game, and it's not in the play of icons, which is part of filmmaking.

HB: Would you accept Bakhtin's term of the *carnevalesque* for your kind of writing?

gv: I do in a couple of ways. I don't write into that because I have never taken any literary theory to write into it. But I am pleased by people who critically interpret certain scenes and episodes in my work, using Bakhtin's *carnevalesque* interpretations and theories. I think particularly of *Griever*. There are a number of scenes, I have read, that have impressed interpreters. The difference is this, that Bakhtin is focusing primarily upon the function of deconstructive carnival energy. But it's a political function that's allowed, tolerated by the state, and that exists in literature in a similar way. My view is that life itself is a carnival, and it doesn't seek the approval of anyone, so there's a difference there. And I say that much about the trickster stories—that there is an imaginative pleasure in these stories, and it's not a political function that allows people to escape from fascist, totalitarian, or the dominant thoughts of anyone. But otherwise I like the Bakhtinian idea. It's a healthy, much healthier interpretation, let's say, than modernism—you know, where you try to define the text within itself. So the political approach is very useful, but it's limited.

kl: So you see life as a carnival. I wanted to ask you if you think that life is an ever-repeated game with the evil gambler? I came to that because I read in your autobiographical book, *Interior Landscapes*, what you wrote about your father, who was mur-

dered: "Clement William Vizenor lost the game with the evil gambler and did not return from the cities." Is there anything true about this image, and can it be reconciled with the notion of a carnival? An ever-repeated game?

cv: Truly, my father was not able to outwit the forces of evil, and the consequences led to his own death, and I don't know all of those. [Pause.] I mean, whatever led to his death, it obviously wasn't a random killing. He may have had debts; he may have been a gambler—I mean a literal gambler—but he also lived the life at that time of many people—which becomes a metaphor—that during the Depression it was difficult enough in urban areas but extremely difficult on reservations. I mean there was absolutely no work and no services of any kind, so he and his brothers moved to the city to work, and that's the gamble, and he lost. He was outwitted, lost his life.

kl: I am interested in what you think the evil gambler stands for. Does he stand for the white world or dominant culture, or does he represent evil in general? That means evil as an integral part of the world and hence part of each individual?

cv: I would argue that, by way of interpretation, the image and the description of the events surrounding the image "evil gambler" or the word game, does not stand for something. That would be representational, but it *is* something, it *is* a mystery, it *is* the contradiction of life and the shadows of tribal memories. Things go wrong, and there is exploitation, dishonesty, evil acts; all of these are contradictory and within us, not outside. Evil games are imagination, not objectivism. That, I think, is a principal distinction, a primal distinction in worldview and philosophy between Western and Native American. The Western world would purge evil, the objective and external, as if evil entered the creation of the gods and my body, and I must purge it, and I must seek a priest to constantly purge from my heart and soul any evil to reach a state of grace. In a tribal worldview, it seems to me, we always have the potential for good and evil. We are good and evil; it's not outside, it's in us. And I think you find evidence in all aspects of tribal life of this sense of a restoration of balance.

Now, I don't want to overplay that because it's like the scales of justice, and that would be a binary. But there are everywhere, say in Navajo, ceremonials when someone's in trouble; whatever it is, it affects the whole world, everything. See, it's internal; it's not outside. And so many ceremonies restore a balance, and in trickster stories they're always restoring some sort of tolerance or balance.

Let me add a couple of more ideas that abstractly describe the difference between tribal and Western. One is contradiction. Only a very few ethnologists have approached this idea of contradiction. Partly, they haven't gotten very far with it because the structuralists, you know, were so persuasive [in their belief] that we are in fact more alike than different in fundamental thinking. Especially the binary structuralists, and that has for a long time been the dominant theory. It still is in many ways. But there has been some writing, some observation that tribal cultures—not just Native Americans but tribal cultures everywhere—had a capacity for contradiction. That contradictions weren't a major obstacle, that a tribal worldview could take on contradictions as a way of life. I mean, you don't have to overcome it; you don't have to purge it; it's just part of a reality. Now, part of the contradictions I am speaking of is that we are capable of good and evil. We don't know what influences come our way. Mysteries, animals, taboos, all sorts of things disrupt our internal balance of the world. Now, out there is this eminence of evil too and this evil gambler who lurks in all of us and draws our attention through animals and stories and mysteries and contradictions and lust and greed. And these stories about the evil gambler work out these contradictions, and it's usually the trickster who outwits the evil gambler. Now, these again are imaginative language games that give a kind of philosophical voice to a character in imagination that can overcome or outwit the evil gambler. The problem is that when all of these pleasures of the literary imagination in a story become representational or symbolic, then they take on political consequences and real actions, which are recorded, and then they no longer serve as an imaginative language game. Then they are rep-

resented, then they are established externally, and then they are no longer play. I think that's one of the outstanding, in fact brilliant literary achievements of tribal storytellers, that they have not sought to represent this language game and this figurative character, the trickster, and also the evil gambler, or the ice woman or other figures in other cultures who are constantly a part of language play. You can't find them anywhere, and they exist in other cultures too, although they may take on representative forms. They are figurative, but some people actually believe they are represented in a way. So it's not just tribal cultures but others.

And it turns out that practically every culture except Western has a well-developed trickster figure in imagination. Especially oral cultures. Something happens in written form, and cultures move from oral to writing; and when they do, it, of course, becomes representational, and anthropologists have burdened us with representational definitions of tricksters. Now, what I'm trying to do is restore the play and pleasure of an imaginative figure that is transformational, which is a contradiction, which is not a developed character because it isn't representational. The trickster is a character who acts rather than poses. Such characters are eminently familiar to tribal storytellers. They don't, you know, they don't need coaching or advice.

HB: Do you see a development in your own use of what you have called trickster discourse from a more person-oriented use in your earlier texts to a more general use, where the tricksters become just a stimulus to the imagination, an element that just flits through the verbal interspace?

gv: I don't think so. Maybe the opposite. [Laughs.] *The Trickster of Liberty*. What I try to do is demonstrate between the stories a whole family of trickster figuration. I represent them as contradictions, mythic reversals; for instance, a Catholic nun, a Catholic priest, an entrepreneur, you know, graduates of the darkness. I mean, I gave them what conventional fiction writers would consider character description—a class, a presence, a gesture, a pose, something recognizable as representation in a contemporary world. But of course, that's anything but who they are. And then

I just deconstruct that. For one thing, they all transform, constantly in a state of contradiction. Whatever is expected of them they are not. I suppose I could play on that even on another level and say, is that any different in real life? If we touch on people's imagination rather than their public pose, we know that we all live in a *constant* state of contradiction. The very instant we smile and pose and accept the manners and gestures of someone, we might be thinking the absolute opposite, you know. I mean it's hard to put this all together. But in *The Trickster of Liberty* I set what appeared to be representational characters but are not.

HB: Well, I was thinking more of *Dead Voices*.

gv: Oh. Well, *Dead Voices* follows . . . I started with this representation in humans in *Trickster of Liberty*; they're all doing human active things, some of them quite miraculously but not miracles. I mean, ecstatic states that influence other people, material culture, animals, behavior, and all my characters have a transformational connection with animals, especially mongrels or dogs, dogs, dogs and bears. In *Dead Voices*, I take trickster stories to the city and create the ultimate contradiction that the city, which is seen as the end of stories, is actually a sanctuary. And then I play out the idea of transformation and different life forms. Well, what I was concerned about was that if I did this in a so-called wilderness area where a character sought these transformational connections I would be revisionist and romantic, and that just isn't dealing with the contradictions at hand in our own experience. So I take this woman to the city, and *there*, in the contradiction of an urban life and massive distractions, she transforms and takes on the identities of various life forms, right in town, and says there are more bears at tables in restaurants in the cities than there are in the wilderness—I mean by transformation and imagination. So your question was "Are the characters more dissociated from that original idea?" Actually, I think it's the reverse, that I'm actually strengthening this power of transformation in my characters.

HB: I was also thinking of, say, the different use of the bear concept. At the end of *Bearheart*, Proude changes into a bear and

moves on to a different world, whereas in *Dead Voices* [GV: They're right there] the bear is right there, and it's in the mirror, so in a way it is also a projection [GV: Oh, I see, I see]. Thus there is a slightly more traditional aspect in *Bearheart*, whereas the handling of the concept is very contemporary in *Dead Voices*.

gv: Yeah, you're quite right. And with the mirror I'm working on image, icon, reflection, mask, and only through the mask can we discover anything and maybe nothing. It's a playing on multiple images, and it is a device to break down the romantic expectation of the real representation of the bear, that fact that the bear is in her and she's not in a traditional time, place, or environment of any kind; and the bear is in memory and imagination. So to have the mirror contain, not reflect, the bear she can't even see clearly in herself was a literary device to bring it alive because she was the only one who could see the bear. Nobody else could see that, although the anthropologists had a glimpse.

kl: Talking about masks, what do you think of the Western concept of personal identity as contrasted to group identity or tribal identity?

gv: There is certainly a lot written on that, in so many philosophical and critical contexts. The mask beneath which there is nothing is a terrifying literary and political idea, and in drama and poetry masks are, of course, necessary and important. I mean, one of those characters in *Bearheart*, the priest, has multiple masks because the priest deals in masks. I mean the whole church is a mask, nations, states are masks, political processes are masks. Some masks are more favorable than others, and we prefer to identify with them and play behind them in a way that wouldn't be tolerable in other situations. I suppose we could say that German unification is a kind of mask, isn't it? I mean it hardly works, and beneath the mask is this irreconcilable contradiction right now over abortion. It's on a political level, bears the masks of unification and a new nation after the consequences of extremely violent politics.

Anyway, in tribal cultures it's the same. A mask of Western civilization and its contradictions, a mask of Indianness, and a

mask to live more comfortable in a world that expects so much from the Indian mask, that has actually been created for the individual. I probably work more with simulations than anything, the consequences of stepping out, destroying, contradicting, outwitting the expectations, the mask that's been created for Native Americans. It's easy now. It wasn't so easy in my father's generation. Most, many Indians trying to find jobs in cities couldn't get jobs as Indians. They weren't seen as good workers. In fact, my father and his brothers chose other identities because they were told that Indians don't live in houses so they wouldn't know how to paint them. So they tried other identities, Greek, Italian, and that was okay because Greeks and Italians knew how to paint things. So they got hired, and once they were successful at house painting they told the employer that, in fact, they were Indians, and he wouldn't believe them because he was absolutely convinced that Indians couldn't do this kind of work. But there, you know, you can see masks operating in a negative way, and if you make it a positive choice, and an act of survival, you can outwit even the most difficult masks imposed on you. But now it's a very positive one. It's highly romanticized, and the expectations among environmentalists, naturalists, tribal revisionists, you know—it's a very positive mask that's created for American Indians for the most part. Certainly in Europe and in large parts of the United States. That's changing, of course. Casinos have changed the mask, or casinos will end the romantic mask for quite a while. Is that what you were getting at, living into masks and contradictions?

kl: I was aiming at the question if you believe that there is something at the core of a person that doesn't change with all these roles or masks he takes on during his life.

gv: Well, your question is "Is identity essentialist?" I once had a loving friendship with a film and stage actor, and she had what I thought was a rather affected gesture with her hand just over her heart, this little turn of her hand in this affected way. And it irritated me. And I was about to be abrupt and say something because it was a pose, a mask, a gesture that was irritating, and

it was a class-conscious pose. And I was about to say something when she showed me a family photograph album, and there was a picture of her about one year old, sitting on a beach, and she had that very gesture. And I realized that this was inherited in some mysterious essential way, that this gesture came with this human being into the world. So I've noticed that in many people, and obviously, tribal consciousness is inherited as gestures and shadows.

Politically, I argue against essentialism because it's too easy to define who and what we are. I argue against it because we can only discover our experience through action, through contradiction, through anarchy, and we even have to attempt to overturn our own pleasures of essential identity. Now, on the other hand, we may realize that so much of who and what we are is genetic. So that would assume a kind of biological scientism or essentialism. I touch on this quite a bit at the end of *The Heirs of Columbus*. In a way it's a very dangerous section in the book, you know. I mean I'm actually talking about the possibility of altering genetic material in such a way that people can be improved, which is really dangerous. The way I talk about it in the book is life-giving, healing, but obviously the political consequences of this are incredible. But there's no way to stop that; that's happening, that's going on. But anyway, in imagination we are essential. We discover deep intimacies of experience. We give, each of us gives meaning to our experience and shadows in a kind of essential way, and that's not always communal. And at the same time we learn things that are of great value communally, and we take pleasure from those past experiences that are represented by cultures and traditions, and some of those contradictions that arise from them.

For example, I try to divide, for purposes of discussion, all experience and identity, but particularly tribal experience and identity, in three ways. First there is an intimacy, at once an emotional dream language. That knowledge in dream is so intimate that we seldom share that with anyone. Occasionally, we come in contact with people with whom we feel this mysterious bond, and we can communicate that understanding, usually in love re-

lationships. Sometimes we're wrong about that, and we pay a terrible price. Then there's privacy. Privacy is determined largely by social and cultural values. Some cultures, nations, are less private than others. Americans seem to be willing to talk about anything: sex life, family, everything. They gossip about everything. British tend to be more restrained about family business. Germans are quite protective about privacy, especially in matters of public discourse, newspapers, access of writers, photographers and things like that, with very developed laws about privacy. But each culture, each tradition has different values, and among tribal cultures there are differences about what might be thought of as private. Now, that's not what's intimate. We all know what's intimate. What we aren't sure about is what's private and public. That varies.

Now, the reason I'm pointing this out is that forever the conquerors assumed the right to whatever was private and transformed that into their public, and they also assumed access to the intimate. Ethnologists, anthropologists believed that it was their right to enter the intimate, to discover the tribal, the sacred, and intimate. And when I talk to students about this, I say, "Would you tolerate in your own family any of the experiences of Indians?" Of course not; they wouldn't. They wouldn't want some anthropologist hanging around trying to find out what the meaning of their meals was, or sexual practices, or the function of their material culture, or their dreams and myths. I mean, this access is assumed as a kind of right of the social sciences, and that raises questions about what is essential too. And also what's public and private and what is communal. Now, here are some contradictions that are not easily understood, and they are differences in worldview. It's said of Indians, because the people who have studied them say this, that many Indian people walk into the public masks and take comfort in them because it's an easy way to be understood. And I don't want to do that. I want to disrupt that. I don't want to be easily understood. I want to complicate the tribal world.

I want to point out just a couple of things about these contra-

dictions of the public, private, and intimate. The general view is that Indians are communal, and the Western world is individualistic and usually material, right? This is a comfortable distinction to make. People take instruction from that, I mean, life value. And yet here's the contradiction. Indians, tribal people, are more individualistic than contemporary whites. And here's what I mean by that contradiction. Just a couple of examples. Tribal people know each other usually through nicknames and the stories behind each nickname. The tribes did not have a surname system. So behind each nickname is a story, and in a lifetime you could have many nicknames, depending upon experiences and how people saw you and what you did. Highly individualistic, isn't it? Not only a nickname that distinguishes an individual absolutely from anybody else but a story that's so unique that it gives you identity. Very individualistic. There's hardly any of that remaining in American popular culture. Hardly any of that remains. People want to dress alike; they want to consume something that will make them look like they're not individuals. Another contradiction is this idea that so many interpreters of Indian life story and autobiography have, and that is that Indians are communal, that they couldn't write autobiography because it's antithetical to their very being of essential communal experience. Now, what rubbish! I mean it seems to me the opposite is true. It's Americans, European Americans who have nothing to write about; they don't have any individual experience, and it would seem to me they are incapable of *autobiography*.

Just one more example. In most tribal cultures there are vision quests. Many individuals do this, and they do this in extreme conditions. They detach, meditate, concentrate, and wait in deprivation to be visited by some force or mysterious energy that exists in the world through animals, through trees, through some life form that becomes an extraordinarily unique experience. So unique that no one else has it. No one else has it. Such as a voice and a story that connects you to some absolutely intimate, sacred memory. Now, what could be more highly individualistic than that? There's nothing like that remaining in Western civilization.

There's nothing in the church except the possibility that some people have ecstatic communion with their creator. Now, the unique thing about this is that nicknames, vision quests, which are extremely individualistic, are *not* separations from communal life. Someone who goes on a vision quest knows that the community he comes from supports this, hopes that it will work out; and if and when it does, the experience and stories may benefit the community. So this extreme individualism is a part of the community. It gives the community energy, power, healing power, insights that it can share collectively. I am generalizing this almost in an idealistic way. Now, in contemporary American society primary experience of individualism is in consumerism. Well, that's hardly individualistic, and you don't have anything when objects are lost. You don't even have community, much less individual identity. So these contradictions, and it seems to me that there's a longing in the Western world that is realized on a literary level in the discovery of tribal cultures. In other words, it's a complete projection: what's missing is found in the other, especially if the other has been conquered, colonized, and yet remains in some way unique, different, and mysterious.

HB: Let me pick up the term "tribal," which you have just mentioned. You prefer it over "Native American" or "American Indian," but the term in itself seems to include both the communal and the private in such a way that it seems possible to apply it to other groups as well and other ethnicities. Is America possibly turning multitribal?

GV: That's a way to affiliate and feel comfortable and also to feel cared for in a way, you know, that you have some ultimate security, that you know you have some tribal support. I use the word to avoid, as often as possible, "Indian," which, of course, is totally unacceptable, and it's a risk because of the problems of language, the changes in language value. The word *tribal* doesn't work in discussing African cultures because it could be seen more often as pejorative than postmodern. It suggests something primitive, and I wouldn't use that word anywhere else in the world. But I think America has a positive association with the word *tri-*

*bal*, and it's at least not pejorative in its current use. So it serves me, this general value in the word world of the communal. It's not easily defined, but it suggests something other than material, other than consumer culture, that it's tribal in the sense of Indian, that it's shared responsibilities and things like that. So then I can specify what I mean by it and not have to deconstruct it. It comes into the language right now. It may well change. Probably after a decade or two of fascist tribal groups—you know, skinheads and clans and white supremacists in America and things like that—it will probably be exhausted as a useful word, so I'll have to come up with something else.

HB: Let me come back to the question of identity. Last night we talked about Diane Glancy, who calls herself a Cherokee with one-eighth Cherokee blood, and, say, Ishmael Reed, who also has about that proportion of [gv: Indian, Irish, Black] Indian blood but of course chooses to affiliate himself with African-American culture. So has cultural affiliation become a matter of choice?

gv: Can't do a yes or no on that. Is cultural affiliation a matter of choice? It's a matter of responsibility, and people do make choices that are responsible to communities. The identity question is so complex that the background conversation we'd have to do to get at it would take the rest of the day. But let me touch on one of the great burdens: the problem of mixed blood. Everybody's been mixed forever. So that's not new. What I'm trying to argue is that mixed-bloods are not incomplete. They're not half of something, or this or that. They're whole people. Now that's difficult in America and in the world because the world is not very tolerant of the idea that someone who is mixed is a whole person. The idea is that mixing is less of something and—depending upon the values in a nation—usually the best part, in the context of racialism, is white.

Now, in America it's an irony. Because of the interest in assimilation, the public policies of assimilation, Indians seem to become white with intermarriage. African-Americans, however, always stay African. They don't become white because of a different sense of racial privilege and an idea of assimilation. Also, Amer-

icans don't, and Germans as well, pretend to be African. But Germans and Americans have made an industry out of pretending to be Indian. Now, it's a serious complication and contradiction that, on the one hand, we have—just these two countries for the moment, Germany and America—invested an enormous amount of personal energy and wealth into the invention and pretension of being Indian. At the same time, both countries have a critical consciousness about who is an Indian and who is not, and they make general negative categorical comments about the mixed-blood. They prefer the pure. I'm not playing on any historical revision here because Americans do the same thing. And it's such a difficult condition of identity because that kind of language leaves someone who's mixed-blood feeling a sense of inadequacy, that in fact the pretend identity is more significant than the mixed identity, which is real. So all of these questions. And then the federal government should establish this racist categorization of blood quantum as if such a thing were possible. If they choose a language of genetic influence or appearance or something, at least that would have a play that could be realized in genetic theory. But blood quantum, as if identity is by a volume!

So that's what Diane Glancy has to deal with and every mixed-blood has to deal with. The reality is that Indians have been mixing forever. Sometimes friendly and sometimes not. And in my part of the country, the mix is primarily French because of the fur trade. And British. In the Pacific Northwest, Russian and English. In the Southwest, Spanish mixed-bloods. So there is intermarriage everywhere, and everyone is mixed in an immigrant nation. But these racial categories obligate people to see themselves in a certain way. Now, my view is this: that identity is a choice, but identity is a responsibility. And it's not who people are by their fractions or their quantum; it's who people are by their responsibility with peers and families and communities. Now, I don't mean you have to be agreeable, but you have to be responsible. So I find it interesting, for example, that very few, or hardly any, of the contemporary writers, Indian writers right now, have ever been active in communities. No radical work, no



community organization. Now, I don't want to bring false credit to myself here, but I have been, and I take some personal pride in having argued in streets and communities the very difficult issues of identity and medical care and education and those matters. For a long time I've taken radical positions. I've paid certain prices, you know, of admission to experience. And I believe in that; I believe experience has to be almost radically acted and earned to be responsible. That doesn't make anybody any better than anybody else. It's a difference that exists, and I think you can see it in literature.

Charles Larson, you know, when he wrote that book *American Indian Fiction*—terrible book, but it was the very first book, published in the seventies, very first study of American Indian fiction; sadly, the second one was the best because Larson was so poorly organized and his categories were stupid—he faced an interesting problem: how do you decide who is an Indian writer? You can't, he pointed out, go by blood quantum because even though someone claims he's an Indian, you know that may just be generations away. There's no contact with it. So he settled upon an idea similar to "peer recognition." If he could discover that a writer who was identified as Indian was recognized by his or her peers, that was substantial support and validation of Indian identity. He said this because, of course, there are so many fakes who pretended to be Indian and who wrote as Indians, and that would have damaged any critical interpretation if he ended up with half a dozen people who were not Indian who claimed they were. And also those books that were "as told to," you know, someone else who helped an Indian writer. And in many cases, both people were invented. So I think some sense of responsibility and peer recognition is very important. And that means you have to earn through responsible acts the choice of identity. I mean you can choose it, but you have to choose to *do* certain things to be responsible for a community, for an idea, for memory, for something. I believe in that. I don't think it's enough to just discover that you've got Indian blood. That's interesting. It *is*, and it's a wonderful connection and start. But you have to be responsible

for that. You have to be responsible for memory and history. So if you make that choice, you have to establish some responsibility by way of an act.

Now, there's a really wonderful person, Hertha Wong, who has just written a book on Indian autobiography. She is a very good scholar. In the preface to this book she speaks of herself as being Indian. She's just discovered that this book has even more meaning now because she just discovered that she's got Indian blood. I think that's really interesting, but what is she trying to say? That now, all of a sudden, this text has an essentialist meaning? It's a really interesting problem and question, and we should be suspicious of someone in a preface to a book claiming this. I'd be much more impressed if she claimed experience and responsibility for her community, for memory, history, for her people. But she can't even identify which tribe she's from. You know, this could be a visitation with essentialism. We can come back to that, that the genes may in fact in the end make the difference, right? But for our purposes in literature, community engagement, it's the choice of taking responsibility for history, for colonial circumstances, for trouble and pleasure and pain and engaging in that directly. I can even argue more strongly that if you haven't been part of community organization, if you haven't argued some issues, if you haven't taken a position in the name of history and your experience, you don't have a right to claim tribal identity or to write about it. That's pretty strong but it's important.

But then we have the other extreme. We have Jamake Highwater, who poses as an Indian without an intimate sense of responsibility for that identity. I couldn't possibly accept his books because he manipulated and falsely presented himself. Or Forrest Carter's *Education of Little Tree*, which is the most recent example of simulated identities. Carter is not known for his responsibilities in an Indian community. He's a good writer, but I was suspicious of the content because it was too linear, it was too romantic, and this is not a "true story" as the publisher claims. However, this is a useful book for critical reasons of identity. And sure enough, it turns out that he's not who he said he was; he may have Indian

blood, but he was never responsible for that experience. That's important to do. Otherwise we have the worst aspect of post-modern consumerism, total simulation, and the simulation precedes the real and in fact is the real, and then the real has to compete with the lie and simulation. I said more than you asked, but then . . .

HB: Your notion of the mixed-blood, of the fruitfulness of bringing together polarities, as one might say, takes me back to a question of literary technique. Would you agree that your literature is basically metaphorical in the sense that you put in two or several semantic poles and have the imagination fill in the interspace, the dream space as you say? It's a technique, I think, that works both in your haiku poems with the different lines, with the different images, and in your fiction with longer complexes developed. It can also be found in your mixture of genres, in your bringing in nonfictional elements when you quote from criticism and so forth. Would you agree that, in the sense of Ricoeur's "creative metaphor," this is a basic principle to your writing?

GV: I do like to leave the pleasure of the meaning and interpretation to the reader, and so, rather than didactically stating or assuming the information that I've obtained, I actually lay out the images and information and leave it to. . . It is a metaphor, but I leave the ends open. What's interesting is that some readers don't believe the historical documents. They think they're fictional, but I can't account for that. I can only act responsibly in that way. It is interesting though. People have some difficulty accepting historical or other documentation in fiction, and I think it's the consumer interests of fiction that make fiction a lie, a simulated escape, you know. Of course, I see fiction as having the healing power of stories, or liberation. At least that's the way I want to write and the way I feel about literature. It has more in common with the postcolonial literature. Because I see that literature as liberation, not in a linear way, but the experiences, and much of that literature also draws upon historical documentation. And the contradictions of history in colonialism, realized as metaphors, are the characters of liberation. And I think readers can be lib-

erated in that way too. They can be liberated from their own pretentiousness. They can be liberated from their own possession of the image, their own guilt through colonization. I take pleasure in Native Americans who find themselves in my work. And I have been greatly honored by a small number, but a very significant number, of Native Americans who write and tell me that, in fact, something in my work did liberate them, that they were not able to see themselves until they read my stories. Most often through my autobiography. And I think it's because I argue for the experience of a whole person. And yet, in the autobiography, I say nothing that's intimate. I say much that's private, a witness to the private, but you won't find confession of the intimate in my work. I believe the essential is intimate, and the intimate is mine. I write memories that are imagined, historical, and private.

KL: I wanted to ask you a question about the mixed-bloods or crossbloods, as you like to say. Do they have a chance or are they the ones capable of creating a new culture? In some sort of dialectical process between the two inherited streams of culture, a culture that will give them their own sense of place?

GV: Well, there's certainly a tension there, isn't there? I mean there's a tension of discovery and liberation, and my argument is that we become whole by this, not parts. But everyone is mixed, everyone. So everyone can discover this. People are just mixed in different ways, and the consequences and interpretations of their differences as sources of identity—let me put it another way. What difference do we make out of the differences? That's my interest. In the past the differences have been violent and terribly damaging, and I'm arguing that the differences are liberation; they're the discovery of a whole person. Throughout tribal history mixed-bloods have always been active in tribal business. I think, not now but perhaps in a decade or two, someone may be able to develop a very impressive critical interpretation about the tension of mixed identity being the source of energy among every, every contemporary Native American writer. They're all mixed-bloods. The difference is that not many of them said so in the beginning, very few. They allowed publishers to present them as

the essential Indian. But every author is a crossblood, in the heart and the word. And that's important, and I wish more authors would speak of that. It's important to know. That would break down this Karl May expectation in Germany, for example. It would enrich the idea of identity. It would make it much more intriguing and interesting. And it would say much more about the world, about colonialism, about postcolonialism, about our resistance to colonialism and the literature of dominance. It would obligate people to enter this tension and imagine it and become whole themselves, you know, to see people in a different way. But by perpetuating this image of essential racial purity, and especially if someone fits the physical description of a kind of Karl May Indian, you know, in a way they're doomed to their own simulation. I mean they have to interpret the difference or argue out of it.

I started a course on "People of Mixed Descent," at Santa Cruz several years ago, and I teach it at Berkeley now. I approach the class historically and theoretically because I want it to be a serious academic seminar. With few exceptions the students who have taken it are crossbloods. Now, no one on campus thinks much about this except the people who are crossbloods. Practically every minority student is a crossblood. And yet they have to choose from just a few generic racial categories. They're very limited: African-American, Native American, Asian-American. Well, break down the Asian into a dozen or more groups. So there will be students in my classes who are Korean-Japanese. Imagine that mix! Imagine having to decide on a category that is less than a whole person; you're whole only by simulation, political simulation, and not by experience. And you have to deny something in order to be less than whole. These classes have been the most exciting, the most moving, and the most liberating of anything I've ever taught because we study the theories of race and culture, the developments of racialism in history, and some of the evil consequences of racial categorization and exclusion; then colonial contact, mixed relations, some willing, some unwilling; and then we talk about our own experience. To hear that experience and

to hear people speak of themselves as a whole person instead of a fragment here and there is very rewarding. The subject has been the most encouraging because people have been so enthusiastic and so eager to take hold of this complicated idea, and there's a lot of tension but it's so liberating.

HB: I should like to wind up in a lighter vein. What is a panic hole?

GV: The experiences of a panic hole are intimate. However, it is in literature, and I have written about it, so the idea is public. That the earth must love to hear my voice. Why else would the earth have given me voice? And I take pleasure in shouting back into the earth the very tension of my existence, the very *tension* of my existence, and the earth is better for it, and so are we with the earth.