

Gerald Vizenor and A. Robert Lee, *Postindian Conversations*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, ix + 192 pp., ISBN: 0-8032-4666-8; \$25 or £16.95 cloth.

'You are talking to the mongrel in me' (102), Gerald Vizenor tells his interlocutor deep into these fascinating/frustrating *Postindian Conversations*. Vizenor is one of the most prolific and best-known of contemporary 'native' voices. (He abhors the word 'Indian,' a term implying cultural dominance, which he writes as indian to indicate its 'simulative' nature, in the postmodernist sense of endless copies lacking an original). A professor of American Studies and Native American Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, Vizenor has produced poetry, fiction, commentary, autobiography and critical theory (see the seven-page bibliography of his publications and selected interviews at the end of this book). The 'mongrel' reference partly reflects Vizenor's conception of himself as a product of many beneficial blendings: his father (murdered less than three years after Vizenor's birth) was part-*Anishinaabe* (Ojibway), his mother was of mixed Euro-American ancestry, and Vizenor sees himself as a 'crossblood.' He also delights in writing Japanese *Haiku* poetry, has lived in China and drawn creatively on his experiences there; and mixes postmodernist theory and native trickster stories and sensibilities.

In the work under review, British-born American Studies professor A. Robert Lee engages Vizenor in a series of interviews/conversations. It is unclear just how the whole corpus originated. How many interviews? Did the published order reflect the conversational drift, or to what extent has Lee rearranged or edited his own and Vizenor's words? As Lee's organization of the material generally works well, do these issues matter? He breaks the conversations into chronologically and thematically-coherent chapters, presenting, for example, Vizenor's moving accounts of his difficult early life, of his army experiences in Asia, of his plays, along with his detailed exegeses of individual works. But within each chapter Vizenor also roams widely and (to this staid historian of American Indian experiences) often wildly. Throughout, Lee does the prodding, Vizenor does the talking – and man does he talk.

There are few issues or groups that escape his ire. Persistent stereotyping and binary thinking, he validly claims, have produced the indian as distinct from real, diverse, complicated, resisting, surviving 'postindian' natives. Vizenor neatly skewers the internationally successful, supposedly pro-Indian movie, *Dances with Wolves*, as an admittedly beautiful re-inscribing of the old stereotypes. So-called radicals of the American Indian Movement (AIM) he sees as publicity-hungry posers. Perceptively, he fears that the success of reservation gambling casinos may produce an outsider envy that bodes ill for continuing tribal sovereignty. He derides 'the dead voices' of the social sciences and cultural studies (137) and – I shiver to write this – 'the acid rain of academic lectures' (127). He ruefully admits to a degree of self-subversion here, as he too is an academic – he might have more deeply reflected upon his now privileged location. Native people 'are the absence, not the presence, at universities' (127) – meaning, I sense, that universities also traffic in 'the Indian' rather than confronting complex post-indian reality. In a passage reminiscent of Vine Deloria's classic attack on anthropologists (*Custer Died For Your Sins* [1969]), but without

considering some of their possibly *positive* contributions to perceptions of natives, Vizenor fumes:

I have not been fierce enough about anthropology. There are no measures of fierceness that could be reparations for the theft of native irony, humor, and original stories. There's not enough time to be critical of the academic enterprise of cultural anthropology. This work that plagues every native in the universe is despicable; it's only in the interests of profits and power that these studies and simulations of culture are given institutional authority. Cultural anthropologists pose with their booty, and universities honor these academic predators (emphasis added) with advanced degrees.... (90)

Not all his opinions are so polemical. He offers tantalizing comment on the sometimes sharp disagreements between contemporary native writers such as the late Michael Dorris, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Silko, Louis Owens, Sherman Alexie, and others (I won't spoil the fun by revealing Vizenor's preferences). And underlying much of his vitriol is a passionate belief that natives must be 'present' in America as real people, not as stereotypes (which even well-meaning whites and AIM radicals, in his view, perpetuate). Natives must not succumb to 'victimry,' a constant whining to impress the media. 'Survivance' (a combination of survival, resistance, and the upsetting of binaries) should be the strategy for natives and for himself as a writer. 'Survivance stories honor the humor and tragic wisdom of the situations, not the market value of victimry,' he writes (37).

This was my most difficult review assignment yet. Beyond Vizenor's promiscuous coining of new words which mean what he wants them to mean, his use of language is often personal, even eccentric, and sporadically postmodernist – a challenging combination! For me the experience was like driving in foggy weather: as the fog momentarily lifted I came upon scenes of powerful clarity and even beauty – to be followed by more fog, then by more clarity. And that, I suspect, is how this postmodernist trickster thinks it should be. A stimulating ride, nevertheless, instructive for Indianists and for all those interested in literature as native, tricky, and ironic. 'Natives are the diverse visionary sovereigns of this continent,' concludes Vizenor (180). And, perhaps not uncontested by other natives and non-natives, he sees himself as their tricky storiér.