

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 46 (2025)

Artikel: Transgeneric transmotion and temporality : Anishinaabe dream songs in Gerald Vizenor's historical fiction Waiting for Wovoka
Autor: Jing, Yifei
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1090396>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

YIFEI JING
(PEKING UNIVERSITY, CHINA)

Transgeneric Transmotion and Temporality: Anishinaabe Dream Songs in Gerald Vizenor's Historical Fiction *Waiting for Wovoka*

Historical fiction often risks slipping into what Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor describes as commercial fiction, which represents a tragic closure of Native presence. Using Vizenor's recent historical fiction, *Waiting for Wovoka* (2023), as a case study, this essay argues that he confronts the slipperiness of the Eurocentric genre with transgeneric transmotion by incorporating tribal literary aesthetics embodied in Anishinaabe dream songs. The essay first identifies the dream song as a poetic form with rich narrative potential and complex temporality. A contrastive interpretation of two dream songs then illustrates how this form reconfigures historical events into Native dream-vision, setting them in motion. Furthermore, juxtaposing six dream songs, the essay discusses the broader Native perspective in reflecting on contemporary issues through the lens of Native memory cycling in time. Finally, the essay moves from images and scenes to discursive lines in dream songs with a focus on "waiting for wovoka" to highlight a distinct Native sense of futurity that transcends territorial, ethnic, and temporal boundaries.

Keywords: Gerald Vizenor; transgeneric transmotion; temporality; Anishinaabe dream songs; *Waiting for Wovoka*

For Native people, the past persists in every conceivable way.¹ In *The Everlasting Sky* (1972), Gerald Vizenor critiques the past "interpreted by white historians and anthropologists," describing it as an "interpretation of the past without dreams" (26). Vizenor, the tribal historian, has reinter-

¹ I am deeply grateful to my doctoral advisor, Assoc. Prof. Limei Xiu, for her careful readings of earlier drafts of this paper, and to Prof. David Stirrup for insights from conversations on my dissertation project. I also thank the anonymous reviewer for their helpful suggestions.

preted the tribal past in what he terms narrative histories.² This essay examines how Vizenor presents the past with dreams as a literary artist and innovative storyteller. Although hardly considered a genre writer, Vizenor has crafted a sequence of five historical novels since the publication of *Blue Ravens* in 2014. The label of historical fiction is not a blurb but his deliberate aesthetic choice, reflecting his awareness of the slippery nature of this Eurocentric genre. He distinguishes Native American literature into two opposing categories: Native literary art that “confront[s] the tragic closure of culture and engender[s] a sense of Native presence instead of historical absence,” and Native commercial fiction that “finds a much wider audience because the themes and style of the narratives focus more on tragic victimry” (Vizenor, “American Indian Art” 43–44). Even when written by a Native author, historical fiction risks slipping into what he terms commercial fiction, joining a variety of popular genres that enact “colonial discourse at the site of imagination” (Byrd 346).

This essay takes Vizenor’s recent historical novel, *Waiting for Wovoka* (2023), as an exemplar to show how he indigenizes the genre by invoking the past in transgeneric transmotion. Set in the summer of 1962, the novel traces the westward journey of the Theatre of Chance, a troupe of Native stowaway puppeteers who have endured abandonment, bullying, abuse, and poverty, from White Earth Reservation to the Century 21 Exposition in Seattle. From the outset, readers are drawn to “poems” – four to five italicized, centered, non-punctuated, lower-cased lines, soon recognizing each of them as an Anishinaabe dream song from its respective contextual prose that explicitly introduces the very concept of this tribal poetic form. The 35 dream songs throughout address many topics, including natural motion, animal presence, “the cant of traditions, ruins of culture, snow ghosts, suicide, totemic unions” and personal tributes (Vizenor, *Waiting for Wovoka* 5). Their presence and thematic concerns echo previous

² Narrative histories feature a combination of documentary collage and narrative structure, the former setting official and other unrecognized or undervalued materials, oral or scriptural, into dialogue to create paradox, irony, and contradiction, meanwhile the latter, imbuing “the facts with suggestion, implication, and possibility – with the shadows of history – thus invoking a fuller truth” (Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor* 86).

discussions on the influence of Vizenor's poetics on his prose writing.³ This essay employs the term "transgeneric" in two senses: first, in describing the inclusion of dream songs incorporated in historical fiction as a genre-bending practice, and second, in acknowledging how Vizenor's historical fiction of Native active presence transcends the genre of commercial fiction representing Native tragic victimry. By underlining the motion, perception, and sentiments invoked and transported by the dual transgeneric aesthetic, the essay argues for a "transgeneric trans-motion" in Vizenor's historical fiction.

The Narrative Potential of Anishinaabe Dream Songs

On the back cover of *Waiting for Wovoka*, Kenneth Roemer describes the enigmatic and pithy lines in the novel as "part haiku/Anishinaabe dream song." However, they are undeniably dream songs, as indicated in context.⁴ Roemer's note suggests that the transgeneric dream songs are more complex and less definite than their ethnopoetic counterparts. As defined by ethnologist Frances Densmore, dream song is a sub-category of Anishinaabe music "said to have come to the mind of the Indian when he was in a dream or trance" or "composed during a dream or on waking from a dream" or "during great mental stress" (*Chippewa Music I* 118; 126; 134). It is also recorded that in physiological and spiritual dreams, the Anishinaabeg "often returned to a previous state of existence; also that they saw things which no Indian had seen at that time, but which they themselves saw and recognized in later years" (Densmore, *Chippewa Customs* 79). In short, with concise lines, dream songs record and express what the Anishinaabeg perceive in dreams. Once composed, they can be revisited and "reimagined" for spiritual guidance and empowerment. Vizenor points out

³ See the articles of Kimberly Blaeser, Katja Sarkowsky, Christina Hein, David L. Moore, and Michael Snyder in *The Poetry and Poetics of Gerald Vizenor* (2012) edited by Deborah Madsen. Blaeser argues elsewhere that some "classic Vizenor themes also find first voice in his poetry," emphasizing the poetic impact beyond form, vocabulary, and imagery on his prose writing ("Interior Dancers" 11–12).

⁴ In 28 out of 35 dream songs, the phrase "dream song" appears in the surrounding prose, reinforcing the concept of the Anishinaabe dream song while distancing it from haiku, despite their close connection in Vizenor's works. In contrast, *The Light People* (1994) by Gordon Henry, Jr., blurs this boundary, as the character Elijah Cold Crow is told that "he could write haiku and they could be like dream songs for him" (65).

that dream songs have been “translated and compared as static, passive cultural evidence [...] rather than as the creative and ironic imagistic scenes of nature by native storiers and artists” (*Favor of Crows* xvii) and that dream songs can only be “reimagined and reexpressed” (Bowers and Silet 49). Vizenor also values Densmore’s inclusion of the stories and “pictomyths” behind the songs, which he incorporates into his own “reexpressions.”⁵ The abundant presence of dream songs in *Waiting for Wovoka* highlights Vizenor’s belief in their narrative potential when adequately contextualized.

Since Densmore brought dream songs to public attention, critics have debated Native originality and creativity, often linking the songs to poetic traditions like Japanese haiku, imagist poetry, and ancient Chinese poetry.⁶ Vizenor was indeed led to Anishinaabe dream songs by haiku. He admits, “haiku [was] an overture to dream songs,” and haiku “touched my imagination and brought me closer to a sense of tribal consciousness” (“The Envoy” 56–67). He publishes collections of haiku and “reexpressions” of dream songs side by side. As Kimberly Blaeser traces the multiple traditions of Vizenor’s English haiku to Japanese haiku, Anishinaabe dream songs, trickster stories, and Native spirituality (*Gerald Vizenor* 108–135), one can reverse the topic, researching the “multiple traditions” of dream songs reimagined by Vizenor. Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that with ten haiku collections and four volumes of dream songs “reexpressed,” neither Vizenor’s haiku nor dream songs are static; they are constantly enriching critics’ formulation of Vizenor’s poetics, and expanding their shared ground. On the one hand, Vizenor acknowledges “three attributes of development” of his later haiku – moving from “common comparative experiences” to “metaphorical, concise” scenes, shifting from past to present tense, and adding the “envoy,” a prose exploration of haiku images and sensations (“The Envoy” 60–61). On the other, the four volumes of dream songs published in 1965, 1970, 1981, and 1993 begin as “accurate reproductions of Densmore’s texts” but gradually evolve into “subjective expressions of Vizenor’s sensibility”

⁵ In Vizenor’s corpus, “pictomyths” refer to “the painted and incised pictures of animals, birds, and miniature characters on birch bark, wood, and stone,” images that invoke “a sense of imagic presence and mythic survivance” (*Native Liberty* 179). In the present essay, other key terms favored by Vizenor, such as “reexpression,” “reexpressed,” and “reimagined,” are likewise marked with quotation marks for emphasis.

⁶ For analyses of these debates, see Blaeser’s *Gerald Vizenor* (109–115), and Adam Spry’s *Our War Paint Is Writers’ Ink* (108–117).

(Spry, *Our War Paint* 129). His sensibility is evident in his introduction to dream songs, interpretation of song stories, and explanation of “picto-myths,” as well as his removal of punctuation, adjustment of lines and stanzas, use of vocables and advanced vocabulary, reduction of subjectivity through a lowercase “i” or omission of the pronoun, and juxtaposition of individual dream songs. These techniques create “a greater indeterminacy, polysemy, and openness that reflect better the conventions of poetry – particularly that of haiku” (Spry, *Our War Paint* 131).

Vizenor’s increasing emphasis on introductory and explanatory envoys to dream songs and haiku raises whether these prose texts signal “a retreat from his faith” in readers’ imagination and participation in constructing meaning (Lynch 216). This concern becomes essential when considering the songs in *Waiting for Wovoka*, where the transgeneric interplay reaches its most intense expression. In the second chapter, “Literary Mercy,” the Native puppeteers “read from the burned pages and create the content and scenes of the absent words on the margins” (11) of burned books salvaged from the reservation library. This vignette may deconstruct the novel, inviting readers to imagine how the burned pages of *Waiting for Wovoka* would appear. The dream songs in the center would likely remain intact, while the surrounding prose would be illegible. This vignette suggests the primacy of the dream songs in reading the novel, relegating the prose text to the role of envoys and encouraging readers to rely on the dream songs to reimagine the narrative. This reinforces Vizenor’s trust in active readers and the narrative potential of dream songs. Rather than disrupting readers’ participation, the prose texts as envoys contextualize the dream songs within historical, social, and political backgrounds. Once the motion of dream songs has been sent and readers have engaged their subjective vision, the envoys – and perhaps the songs – will fade away.

The dream songs in the novel are meant to be heard transgenerically, alongside the echo of prose envoys. No longer objects of ethnological study or confined to the tribal past, the dream songs assert cultural sovereignty as a tribal literary form revived through written pages and in dialogue with various poetic traditions. More than recording and representing a dream vision, the narrative potential of dream songs is valued and fully realized. The Eurocentric genre of historical fiction may sound oxymoronic to the Anishinaabeg, who entertain a distinct way of envisioning the past in tales: They “believe in the past because people are the center of tales – the people feel the past in the present – which change as they are told again and again just as the sun and the moon and the people

change” (Vizenor, *Anishinabe Adisokan*). However, with dream songs and their inherent complex temporality involving the dreams in the past, the guidance in the future, and the awareness of the present, a historical novel can be indigenized for a proper Native story of a reciprocal past that empowers the future.

Historical Events Transmotioned into Dream Vision

Waiting for Wovoka is centrally about the Native troupe’s westward journey to Seattle, but the narrator keeps readers waiting for the event. In the 12-chapter novel, readers do not learn about the journey until chapter eight, and the troupe does not depart until chapter nine. The first half of the novel, tracing even to the 1890s with an elusive temporal framework, contains more idea-driven vignettes than plot, highlighting the troupe as “a curious sanctuary for runaways” (7) who share “a buoyant sense of presence” (20) and survivance. The narrative is further fragmented by visual blank space and the dream-like quality of the dream songs. When the troupe finally sets off, the narrative quickens, offering an itinerary-like specificity of dates and places. The transgeneric dream songs then function as pauses for poetic meditation and imagination, transforming historical events into Native dream visions. Below is a contrastive reading of two songs about the troupe’s departure, illustrating the imbuing creative motion in this tribal poetic form of narrative.

The first dream song, composed by Dummy, reads as follows:

postcard mary
creates marvelous worlds
waiting for heart stories
eternal ghosts of the fur trade
hearsay of liberty (66)

The song honors Postcard Mary, a reservation post officer who imagines the troupe’s departure as a spaceship hearsay. The hearsay breaks temporal boundaries set by settler-colonial narratives “between an ‘advancing’ people and a ‘static’ people [Natives], locating the latter out of time [...] where they are unable to be modern, autonomous agents” (Bruyneel 2). From *The Progress* to national news broadcasted “regularly on cheap mail order radio from Sears, Rosebuck & Company” (Vizenor, *Waiting for Wovoka* 39), the Anishinaabeg stay tuned to world events. The departure hearsay pertains to the early 1960s, the Age of Space, playing on the Ex-

position's centerpiece, the Space Needle, which "was as if a spaceship from a friendly future had landed in [the] backyard" (Berger). The "marvelous worlds" is a double entendre, referring both to the storied worlds created by Postcard Mary and the five "worlds" of the Exposition, namely, the World of Science, the World of Century 21, the World of Commerce and Industry, the World of Entertainment, and the World of Art.

The historical specificity is most evident in the fourth line. In the forward-looking Exposition, Natives are represented as a ghostly presence. Northwest Coast Indian Art and four other exhibits are hosted in the Fine Arts Pavilion, the World of Art. According to the *Seattle World's Fair 1962: Official Guide Book*, the five exhibits range "from ancient Oriental sculpture to the most modern examples of abstract expressionism" (88). For Vizenor, the establishment of the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe in 1962 marks a "breakthrough in Native arts from simulation and traditional representation [...] to original abstract figuration and expressionism" ("American Indian Art" 44), and for the troupe in the novel, "the eternal images and scenes of great cultures [are] continued in the creative visions of [Northwestern] artists" (*Waiting for Wovoka* 91).⁷ Nevertheless, the exhibit at the Exposition does not gather Native abstract art, only framing Native art as inherently "traditional" and antithetical to modernity. Art critic Anne G. Todd notes that the venue for displaying these "too rare and splendid" Native artifacts is "a lobby decorated in a Northwest theme," and that the curator Erna Gunther intentionally withholds basic information about each piece, such as its origin, tribal affiliation, and lending institution (qtd. in Blecha). Gunther justifies this by stating that many pieces are displayed as sculptures, removed from their original cultural context, "adjusted better to our aesthetic enjoyment" (101). Gunther's explanation connotes "a [sense of] necessary compromise – one necessitated by the requirement of taking indigenous-though-exotic artifacts and, hopefully, displaying them in a meaningful way at an expo thoroughly steeped in futuristic trappings" (Blecha). The "compromise" is at the expense of Native cultural presence in that the exhibit embodies a typically representational and nostalgic understanding of Native

⁷ The breakthrough was more in terms of institutional support and public taste than the expressiveness inherent in Native art that had not been duly recognized earlier. For instance, Anishinaabe expressionist painter George Morrison's works were rejected in the 1950s for not being considered "Indian" enough (see Vizenor, "American Indian Art" for further reading).

art, reinforcing temporal boundaries that place Native presence in the past, trapping it in a futuristic vision shaped by settler-colonial logic.

In contrast to the historical nuances in the above song, Dummy also celebrates the departure as

spirit lake memories
puppets and loyal mongrels
theatre of chance in natural motion
heart stories and parleys
liberty on the road (65)

This reads like an imagic summary of the novel, yet with images of tremendous ambiguity and discursive motion. The “theatre of chance,” referring to the name of the troupe and the school bus remodeled for the journey, is formed by Native stowaway puppeteers and mongrels, symbolizing Anishinaabe artistic creativity and totemic associations. The “spirit lake” is Dummy’s place of origin and the troupe’s base on the reservation, and their first camping site at Devils Lake, North Dakota. Dummy’s substitution of “Devils Lake” – a widely used but colonial translation until the 1990s – with “spirit lake” reflects a pursuit of Native linguistic sovereignty.⁸ The “spirit lake memories,” including “heart stories and parleys” performed by the troupe “on the road” and in Seattle, stand for Native memories that counter “customs, recitations, and a single recount of memory” (Vizenor, *Waiting for Wovoka* 46) imposed by American society and the Exposition.

Furthermore, in the absence of a verb, a subjective voice, and a sense of pastness, this song transforms the troupe’s departure into a historical dream in motion. Dummy composes the song to celebrate her first trip outside the reservation since the 1890s. Unlike many dream songs collected by Densmore, which feature a first-person voice to express an individual’s dream vision, this song lacks a personal voice. Seemingly, it presents a collection of vague images, turning a personal memory into a

⁸ Originally called “Mni Wakan,” meaning “sacred or spirit lake,” the lake was home to “Water Spirits (Unktehi, meaning Terrible Ones)” (Garcia) but was misinterpreted as Devils Lake by settler-squatters in 1884 (Williams 238). The name-giver was not necessarily a linguist or missionary, but this calque reflects Anishinaabe linguist Mskwaankwad Rice’s argument that the “linguist has been employed in justifying acts of genocide” by “assuming authority and ownership over Indigenous linguistic data” (1). The Devil’s Lake Sioux Tribe worked to correct the name, and in May 1995, a referendum changed it to Spirit Lake Tribe, ratified by the US government in November (Sanstead 29).

shared one of the troupe. But it should be noted that the personal perspective of the song is not solipsistic, nor is it conveyed through a pronoun. Instead, it is gained through active listening. As other puppeteers and readers engage with the images stacked in Dummy's song of departure, they experience a sense of discovery and a personal voice that is "dynamic and visionary" (Vizenor, *Favor of Crows* xxiv). This song also moves like a haiku yet without any verb. Blaeser observes that Vizenor favors a "subtle undercutting of expectations" (*Gerald Vizenor* 121) in the last line of his haiku, sometimes even by using a noun as a verb; and, as mentioned in the previous section, such a verb is in the present tense in Vizenor's recent haiku collections. Without a verb and a clear sense of temporality, the song evokes a dreamscape where "words dissolve: no critical marks, no grammatical stains remain" (Vizenor, *Matsushima* 5). Prepositional phrases like "in natural motion" and "on the road" (*Waiting for Wovoka* 65) emphasize the ongoing motion of activities and poetic sentiments. The pervasive sense of motion transcends Eurocentric linear temporality and rejects any closure. Without question, this song not only encapsulates the central narrative of *Waiting for Wovoka* but also transforms it and, from it, generates a constellation of ahistorical, timeless, and visionary dreams. Vizenor and the narrator invoke "in the clouds" (36), a metaphorical phrase of natural motion recurring 11 times to argue for the elusiveness and enchantment of many dream songs that blur linguistic and temporal borders. The two songs on departure here not only attest to Native presence beyond "mere territoriality, in the sense of colonialism and nationalism" (Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses* 183) but also to Native cultural creativity and temporal sovereignty.

Seeing the Present in Native Memory

While the Century 21 Exposition embraces a future of American exceptionalism by celebrating scientific progress, technological advancement, space exploration, and military power, the Native troupe is genuinely concerned with the condition of all living beings. Through dream songs, they weave the past into a reciprocal relationship with the present. Six songs on totemic animals are juxtaposed here – a critical perspective intended by Vizenor in his rearrangement of dream songs by Densmore – to unveil the troupe's examination of the 1960s from a Native perspective. The word "totem" originates from the Anishinaabemowin word "Odoodemān." The term first entered English through the writings of eight-

eenth-century British trader John Long, who used it to reinforce his perception of “the Anishinaabe hunter’s austerity” and “irrational economic behavior” (Spry, “False Idols” 232). However, Long is “culturally, contextually, and linguistically” wrong and his reification of “Odoodeman” is anchored in racial, bourgeois, and capitalist logic, which is “a projection of Euro-American anxieties about modernity – specifically, capitalist commodification – onto a racialized other” (Spry, “False Idols” 233–238). Vizenor approaches the concept from the animate intransitive verb “Odoodemi,” meaning “to have a totem,” and understands it as “an association of natural motion, a sense of totemic presence and survivance, and native resistance to the perversions of power over nature” (*Native Provenance* 105). Vizenor believes that in literary art, Native authors create totemic animals as metaphors “for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness” (George Lakoff, qtd. in Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses* 122).

Here are four of the six dream songs – the top two composed by La Chance and the bottom two by Dummy:

chorus of wolves	autumn favors
bear totems in the white pine	elusive cedar waxwing
shouts of beaver	sound of sumac
bundled as fancy fashion (1)	totems in the clouds (3)
silent memories	water ouzels
heart of natural motion	stray shadows in the river
totemic secrets	rush of memories
massacre of the fur trade	glacial traces in the stone
native fear and fury (6)	kootenai creation (72)

They collectively animate nature, restoring “totemic secrets” to animals. In La Chance’s songs, the ‘chorus’ and ‘shouts’ of totemic animals, alongside a personified ‘autumn’ that ‘favors’ elusive cedar waxwings and the rustling sumac, evoke a dynamic, interconnected world of living beings. Dummy’s songs emphasize how totemic animals weave into her “rush of memories” as “stray shadows.” The phrase “rush of memories,” to borrow Blaeser’s comment on a Vizenor haiku, represents “a cultural interpretation of a natural phenomenon” (*Gerald Vizenor* 123) and encourages readers to become discoverers rather than passive observers. Neither distant nor inaccessible, the nature envisioned in these songs collaborates with Native people. For instance, memories of water ouzels and “glacial traces in the stone” resonate with Kootenai creation stories and surviv-

ance, while the tangible imprints of geological transformation further position Native creation stories as alternative forms of history-keeping. The four songs reject the capitalist reification, commodification, and abstraction of totemic animals, as well as the separatist view that positions humans apart from the cosmos. Instead, they restore complexity, dynamism, and spiritedness to totemic animals, embracing a world that can only be partially named and represented through a mode of understanding grounded in dreamlike perception and visionary expression.

The motion in these songs also conveys a sense of “native fear and fury” over the mass slaughters of animals. This anger is directed at fur traders, consumers – including “aristocrats, bankers, politicians, cowboys, gangsters, and film noir movie actors” (Vizenor, *Waiting for Wovoka* 2) – and even Native hunters complicit in the trade. Wolves, bears, and beavers are “bundled as fancy fashions” (1), their lives and spirits reduced to luxury goods. Preparing a bundle – traditionally a gesture of cultural, ceremonial, and spiritual significance – is distorted into a capitalist and rational act, reducing totemic animals to tradable property and products. The troupe brings the issue of the ongoing massacres of animals to the Exposition, and Native “fury” intensifies into an apocalyptic “fear” laden with futuristic anxieties. These four dream songs represent the most urgent and immediate Native reflections on post-war America. Below are two additional songs of Dummy:

bald eagles	nuclear war stories
poisoned by suckers	hiroshima the death of totems
chemical traders	castle bravo alights in the blood
lethal summer sprays	dream songs in the clouds
lakes of graves (77)	waiting for wovoka (92)

These two address the “evil twins” in post-war America: chemical pollution and nuclear weapons. Dummy creates the first song after the troupe reads the first chapters of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* featured in “the June 16, 1962 special edition of the *New Yorker* magazine” (*Waiting for Wovoka* 66) provided by Postcard Mary. Joni Seager contextualizes *Silent Spring* within the era of “control of nature” and “man against nature” (23). Carson criticizes chemical industries with increasing institutional and financial backing for propagating the ideology of the “habit of killing – the resort to ‘eradicating’ any creature that may annoy or inconvenience us” (124). Carson especially abhors the least controlled and most indiscriminate use of pesticides through aerial spraying. When post-war America is “in many ways, a brashly confident place” (Seager 58), Dummy

uses the consequences of pesticide misuse to project an apocalyptic scene in her song. The word “suckers” carries a dual meaning, referring both to sucker fish – the prey of the bald eagle – and the “chemical traders” responsible for the deadly sprays. Through this layered imagery, Dummy warns that the impact of these chemicals extends beyond the extinction of totemic animals, envisioning a broader ecological catastrophe: an ecosystem of “graves” caused by the bioaccumulation and biomagnification of pesticides, affecting not just animals but humans, including the traders themselves. The concept of the ‘ecosystem,’ fashioned in the 1930s in Britain, was in its infancy in America when Dummy depicts the natural, spiritual, and ontological interconnectedness between humans and all living beings.

Totemic animals are decimated yet again by nuclear weapons. The second song epitomizes the links and chains of the past, the present, and the future. While many visitors regard the Exposition as “an exposition of contenders, more science, space, and futurity” (Vizenor, *Waiting for Wovoka* 90), Atomic 16, a World War II veteran, alerts us that the “new fascists are scientists who design deadly nuclear weapons, and the world is much more dangerous today than the desperate years between the two world wars” (90). The American narrative of “nuclear war stories” may be how the American “military’s atomic program represent[s] a pinnacle of scientific and technological accomplishment” (Seager 43). In contrast, the Native version in Dummy’s song casts light on the overlooked killing of animals by Little Boy dropped in Hiroshima, and the radioactive residues in the blood of sailors of the Lucky Dragon caused by Castle Bravo. Though nine years apart, these two disasters are paralleled by Dummy, revealing the far-reaching consequences of nuclear weapons.

The six dream songs, in their juxtaposition, envision the natural motion and totemic associations in Native memory and condemn the triple massacres of totemic animals in recent human history. They recall Vizenor’s short story “Sand Creek Survivors,” where his journalist-storier-persona, Clement Beaulieu, reports the death of 13-year-old Dane Michael White as the latest episode of the Sand Creek Massacre, further underscoring the ongoing legacy of violence. Vizenor asserts that “in dreams and visual tribal memories, these grievous events [...] are not separated in linear time” (*Earthdivers* 34). The six songs locate what the Exposition boasts in Native memory of totemic animals, disrupting a sense of temporal reality and questioning the rigid periodization and isolation of historical events. The timelessness and presentness of the tragic victimhood of animals hold a mirror to human fate against the illusory confidence and

progressiveness exhibited by the Exposition. Such a cautionary consciousness stems from how the Anishinaabeg engage with the past through re-envisioning it from the present and their belief in “Minobimaadiziwin,” “the good life,” which entreats them to “undertake the ethical, responsible, and dynamic process of relationship-making in order to enjoy a healthy life” (Sinclair 62) on the Turtle’s Back.

Native Futurity in “Waiting for Wovoka”

Beyond rich and meaningful imagery, the transgeneric dream songs feature lines that function as metaphors for Native discourse, such as “ironic scenes” (Vizenor, *Waiting for Wovoka* 14), “lasting dream songs of liberty” (14), “curves of memory” (26), “scenes of native mockery” (26), “spirit over tradition and temptation” (35), “dream songs in the clouds” (36), “chance of memory” (36), “heart stories and parleys” (65), and “stories in thin air” (69), among others. They suggest that Native discourse is always present, diversified, ironic, transcending, spontaneous, evasive, in motion, and can be expressed artistically in stories, songs, and parleys. The troupe’s central discursive proposal is expressed in the phrase “waiting for wovoka” (92). As both the novel’s title and the final line of the last dream song analyzed above, the phrase reflects Native meditation on the 1960s through the lens of the Exposition and points to a distinct Native futurity shaped by “native fear and fury” (*Waiting for Wovoka* 6).

As more Native authors venture into the realm of science fiction, Native futurity rises to be a key topic. Mathias Nilges argues that one of the most significant and distinct aspects of it is its commitment to “decolonizing the temporal imagination,” which is bound with “the radical refusal of the standardized, normative, and linear temporality of colonial domination and capitalist expansion as the only way to tell time and to know ourselves in this world” (434). Native temporality is complex, as Anishinaabe cultural critic Grace Dillon explains in an interview with artist and writer Pedro Neves Marques: “everything that’s in the past and the future is also in the now, but it’s not as simplistic as that [...] there exists a spiral of intergenerational connections, so that even if you are in the present[,] you have spirit persons at your side” (6). Dillon invokes “kobade,” an Anishinaabemowin word, to describe the future; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains “kobade” as “a link in a chain” of networks and relationships “cycling through time,” which throws her into “thinking about

what I wanted for my own grandchildren” and thus anchors her vision of the future in the present (“I Am Not”). The connections among the past, the present, and the future – these temporal markers suggesting linearity must be used for discussion at the moment but their insufficiency in addressing Native temporality should be recognized – compel us to consider Indigenous Futurisms as “a symbol of survival and a new, powerful form of presence out of which new, decolonial notions of futurity may emerge,” a Native futurity that is “aimed at overcoming the limitations of the existing, and this may happen in a range of ways” (Nilges 454; 442).

Waiting for Wovoka is not science fiction, yet it is undeniably futurist-ic. Into the phrase “waiting for wovoka,” the troupe weaves a Native futurity that focuses on comic vision rather than tragic suicides, survivance rather than false hope, the present rather than the past, cultural creativity rather than betrayals of stories, relations rather than separation, and on Native temporality rather than settler temporal boundaries. The Native troupe endeavors to enlighten visitors to the Exposition with a Native sense of futurity. The phrase pays tribute to Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* staged at the Exposition’s Playhouse. The audience, struck by the gloom, weight, silence, and the pervasive sense of “suicide in every scene” (*Waiting for Wovoka* 98) in Beckett’s play, are left with a feeling of “nothing to be done” (*Waiting for Wovoka* 98), much like the two protagonists. Chapter four of *Waiting for Wovoka* depicts the tragic fate of a Native boy who hangs himself after being seduced by Snow Ghost – a figure who shames Native people and entices them toward an easy death, offering false hope that ultimately proves illusory. Godot is likened to the Snow Ghost of the 1960s, an absurd presence that denies stories, vision, the power of words, and alternative modes of temporality, and triggers a sense of separation, alienation, uncertainty, nothingness, absence, and tragic suicides. Godot casts its shadow everywhere, even near the Exposition. The troupe attracts some veterans wandering in Seattle, trapped in the past and excluded from the Exposition’s futuristic vision. These desolate veterans either repeat sorrowful war stories that should be told “for the trust and charity” (*Waiting for Wovoka* 103) or remain silent altogether. Both groups never “envision the scenes of combat, fear, and death as the practices of memory in ironic stories” (103), teetering on the edge of being seduced by Godot and Snow Ghost.

The troupe insists on “waiting for wovoka,” believing that the sense of absence and victimry must be countered, ridiculed, and teased through artistic expressions such as stories and dream songs. The phrase itself is oxymoronic, as Wovoka – the Paiute prophet and inspirational leader of

the epochal Ghost Dance movement, who urged Native people to dance and chant for the resurgence of deceased Natives and buffalo – cannot himself be resurrected. Wovoka is not a haunting specter but “a figure of futurity” (Rifkin 130) and a Native metaphor and symbol of the chance and vision of survivance – “an active sense of presence over historical absence, the dominance of cultural simulations, and manifest manners” in “a continuance of stories” (Vizenor, *Native Liberty* 1). The phrase “waiting for” serves as an incantatory refrain throughout the novel. Besides “Wovoka,” “waiting for” is followed by visionary figures (totemic ghost dancers, Sitting Bull, Hole in the Day, Samuel Beckett, and Nancy Cunard), Vizenor’s trickster characters (Baron of Patronia and the Trickster of Liberty), creative stories or performances (the hearsay of ravens, the stories of tragic irony, Native heart stories, and puppet parleys), and Native spiritual beliefs (totemic solidarity and totemic chance). The list continues. The troupe gathers these diversified forms of memory, force, knowledge, spirituality, and relationship across different chronological, spatial, and discursive landscapes, invoking in visitors to the Exposition a futuristic vision of survivance. As they await their own “wovoka,” visitors can balance themselves with and build a reciprocal relationship with the past from the present perspective, and “coalesce[] present sensations in ways that alter the potentials available in the present” and “open[] onto other potential modes of being-in-time” (Rifkin 143–144). This comic vision lies at the heart of Native futurity.

Individual visionaries, regardless of ethnic background, shall have their own expressions of vision and futurity, even in silence. “Never shame a hesitant child with silence” (Vizenor, *Waiting for Wovoka* 104) and “silence is every threshold of every native story” (105), Dummy insists. Never viewed negatively in Anishinaabe culture, silence “assists an individual in developing a heart-to-heart connection with the world” and “helps give rise to the comic vision of the Anishinaabeg” (Gross 7). For Vizenor, too, the power of silence is undeniable – it cultivates a space for personal reorientation, connection with the world, and the creation of stories. He reflects in his autobiography: “Tribal tricksters, benign demons, and woodland atomies of praise and pleasure, arose in my imagination that year of silence in the third grade and became stories, metaphors on the borders, certain names with real stature” (*Interior Landscapes* 73). Hence, whether through artistically expressed vision, or withheld visions in creative silence, both convey a Native sense of futurity that contrasts with the one presented at the Exposition. Like many ethnic writers who write historical fiction, Vizenor succeeds in “reinsert[ing]

[Native] communities into the past, rescuing them from the marginal positions to which they have consciously been consigned” (Groot 148). Moreover, Vizenor goes further by placing Native temporality and futurity in a dialogic and confrontational relationship with normative and manifest settler perspectives, reconstructing and retelling the sense and experience of time.

Conclusion

What this essay terms “transgeneric transmotion” contributes to scholarly interpretations of Vizenor’s still-evolving conceptualization of transmotion – “a new aesthetic convergence of literary art” and “a new aesthetic resistance and natural motion in the literature of Native Americans” that engender Native presence (Vizenor, “American Indian Art” 48; 51). By incorporating Anishinaabe dream songs, Vizenor indigenizes historical fiction and transforms it into a dynamic space where Native memory, oral tradition, and poetic vision coalesce. Dream songs, far from being mere lyrical embellishments or cultural evidence, serve as poetic interludes and critical interventions in the narrative, guiding readers toward an alternative mode of historical engagement – one rooted in dream-vision, totemic presence, reciprocal relationships with the past, and a comic vision of Native futurity. The structural interplay between prose and dream songs underscores Vizenor’s commitment to a transgeneric aesthetic, one that challenges the boundaries of literary form, transcends the Native tragic victimry and closure simulated by some genre fiction, and affirms Native active presence and survivance.

References

- Berger, Knute. "Back to the Future: Why Seattle's World's Fair Mattered." *SeattleMag*, 12 Jan. 2012, seattlemag.com/food-and-culture/back-future-why-seattles-worlds-fair-mattered/. Accessed 17 Nov. 2024.
- Blaeser, Kimberly. *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*. U of Oklahoma P, 1996.
- . "'Interior Dancers': Transformations of Vizenor's Poetic Vision." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1997, pp. 3–15.
- Blecha, Peter. "Century 21 World's Fair: Northwest Coast Indian Art Exhibit." *HistoryLink*, 26 Dec. 2009. historylink.org/File/9238. Accessed 17 Nov. 2024.
- Bowers, Neal, and Charles L. P. Silet. "An Interview with Gerald Vizenor." *MELUS*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1981, pp. 41–49.
- Bruyneel, Kevin. *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.-Indigenous Politics*. U of Minnesota P, 2017.
- Byrd, Jodi. "Red Dead Conventions: American Indian Transgeneric Fictions." *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature*, edited by James H. Cox and Daniel Heath Justice, Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 344–358.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. 1962. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994.
- Densmore, Frances. *Chippewa Customs*. 1929. Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1970.
- . *Chippewa Music I*. Government Printing Office, 1910.
- Dillon, Grace, and Pedro Neves Marques. "Taking the Fiction Out of Science Fiction: A Conversation about Indigenous Futurisms." *e-flux Journal*, no. 120, 2021, pp. 1–7.
- Garcia, Louis. "Sacred Places of the Mniwakan Oyanke." *Tribal College Journal*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2024, n. p.
- Groot, Jerome De. *The Historical Novel*. Routledge, 2010.
- Gross, Lawrence. *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being*. Ashgate, 2014.
- Gunther, Erna. *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Exhibit at the Seattle World's Fair Fine Arts Pavilion*. Seattle World's Fair, 1962.
- Henry, Gordon, Jr. *The Light People*. U of Oklahoma P, 1994.
- Lynch, Tom. "To Honor Impermanence: The Haiku and Other Poems of Gerald Vizenor." *Loosening the Seams: Interpretations of Gerald*

- Vizenor, edited by A. Robert Lee, Bowling Green State U Popular P, 2000, pp. 203–224.
- Madsen, Deborah, editor. *The Poetry and Poetics of Gerald Vizenor*. U of New Mexico P, 2012.
- Nilges, Mathias. “The Temporal Imagination of Indigenous Futurisms.” *College Literature*, vol. 50, no. 2–3, 2023, pp. 432–456.
- Rice, Mskwaankwad. “Power and Positionality: A Case Study of Linguistics’ Relationship to Indigenous Peoples.” *Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of America*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1–11.
- Rifkin, Mark. *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*. Duke UP, 2017.
- Sanstead, Wayne G. *The History and Culture of the Mni Wakan Oyate*. Chester Fritz Library, 1997.
- Seager, Joni. *Carson’s Silent Spring: A Reader’s Guide*. Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Seattle World’s Fair 1962: Official Guide Book*. Acme, 1962.
- Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. “I Am Not a Nation-State.” *Unsettling America*, 6 Nov. 2013, unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/tag/kobade/. Accessed 28 Jan. 2025.
- Sinclair, Niigaanwewidam James. *Nindoodemag Bagijiganan: A History of Anishinaabeg Narrative*. 2013. The U of British Columbia, PhD dissertation.
- Spry, Adam. “False Idols: Totemism, Reification, and Anishinaabe Culture in Modernist Thought.” *The Routledge Handbook of North American Indigenous Modernism*, edited by Kirby Brown, Stephen Ross, and Alana Sayers, Routledge, 2023, pp. 232–243.
- . *Our War Paint Is Writers’ Ink: Anishinaabe Literary Transnationalism*. SUNY Press, 2018.
- Vizenor, Gerald. “American Indian Art and Literature Today: Survivance and Tragic Wisdom.” *Museum International*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2010, pp. 41–51.
- . *Anishinabe Adisokan*. The Nodin Press, 1970.
- . *Earthdivers: Tribal Narratives on Mixed Descent*. U of Minnesota P, 1981.
- . *Favor of Crows: New and Collected Haiku*. Wesleyan UP, 2014.
- . *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence*. U of Nebraska P, 1998.
- . *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors*. 2nd ed., SUNY Press, 2009.
- . *Matsushima: Haiku*. Nodin Press, 1984.

- . *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*. U of Nebraska P, 2019.
- . *Native Provenance: The Betrayal of Cultural Creativity*. U of Nebraska P, 2019.
- . "The Envoy to Haiku." *Chicago Review*, vol. 39, no. 3/4, 1993, pp. 55–62.
- . *The Everlasting Sky: New Voices from the People Named the Chipewa*. Crowell-Collier Press, 1972.
- . *Waiting for Wovoka: Envoys of Good Cheer and Liberty*. Wesleyan UP, 2023.
- Williams, Mary Ann Barnes. *Origins of North Dakota Place Names*. North Dakota State Library, 1966.

