

Radical Migrations Through Anishinaabewaki

Spirit Island

JILL DOERFLER

DYLAN MINER: *Tell us a little about yourself and what you do?*

JILL DOERFLER: I was born on April 15, 1979 and grew up on the White Earth Reservation. My parents built a house about two miles outside Mahanomen when I was five. We lived within walking distance to my maternal grandparent's place and also to my mother's brother and his family. So I grew up surrounded by extended family. I was the first in my family to attend college and went to the University of Minnesota-Morris. I was very interested in history, literature, and politics and, with mentorship and encouragement from both family and faculty at Morris, I decided to go on for my Ph.D. I had a pretty strong idea of what I wanted to write my dissertation on right away, which was Anishinaabe identity and tribal citizenship. I went to American Studies at the University of Minnesota, where I received excellent training and mentorship. I am now an assistant professor of American Indian Studies at the University of

Minnesota-Duluth. I teach a wide range of classes, including literature classes and also interdisciplinary history classes. My research is focused on Anishinaabe conceptions of identity during the twentieth century. I am interested in how and why Anishinaabe (and American Indian) identity has been racialized by the U.S. I am also really excited about the work I have been able to do at White Earth with regard to the constitution. I have written many newspaper articles for our newspaper, the *Anishinaabeg Today*, and have also been invited to give public presentations on my research. I was selected to be a member of the committee who drafted the now ratified *Constitution of the White Earth Nation*.

DM: *Your work focuses, at least from my perspective, on tribal sovereignty and re-writing Anishinaabeg history from the perspective of tribalography. Can you talk a bit about the importance of your work and what tribalography is?*

JD: I was first introduced to LeAnne Howe's theory of tribalogy in a graduate course and then LeAnne was hired as a visiting professor, so I was able to take courses with her and she became a member of my dissertation committee. After I finished, I took a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Illinois, which is where LeAnne had taken a permanent position. I was able to spend more time working on my application of tribalogy in regards to Anishinaabe history and concepts of identity. LeAnne has explained that tribalogy grew out of the Native propensity to connect things together. It is the idea that Native writers often tell stories that combine autobiography, history, and fiction; we tell stories that include all these elements and also work in collaboration with the past, present, and future.

In many ways, her description of tribalogy reminds me of what we generally term "traditional" stories. These stories are not generally about finding out what really happened but are meant to teach us something and to show us our place within our families, communities, nations, and the world. I found that in addition to serving as a critical lens for literary study and as a theoretical framework for cultural analysis, tribalogy can also serve as an abundantly fruitful methodological approach relevant across the interdisciplinary field of American Indian studies. I applied tribalogy as a methodology for my article "An Anishinaabe Tribalogy: Interweaving and Investigating Concepts of Identity during the 1910s on the White Earth Reservation." I found that tribalogy balances rights and responsibilities—something we all grapple with as scholars.

Tribalographic stories consist of connections drawn between autobiography, fiction, history, and time (past, present, future) relationships which, Howe suggests, all necessitate reciprocity. As Howe has argued, "A Native writer remains in conversation with the past and the present to create the future." As I was working on an article addressing Anishinaabe concepts of identity during the early-twentieth century I wanted to consider how my creation of history would also impact the present. I knew that my framing of the past would shape how we see things today. I did not want to create an isolated narrative; I wanted something that would be important to people today both for its presentation of the past and for its vision of the present and future. I had a responsibility to acknowledge and strengthen the connections between the past, present, and future. Tribalogy opens spaces for Indigenous scholars to defy the idea of fact and fiction.

DM: *Unlike Western academic disciplines, which frequently departmentalize academic knowledge into specific fields of study, your work engages the humanistic study of Native literature with very real political projects. What is the relationship between literature (or art in general) and Anishinaabe sovereignty?*

JD: One of the major charges of American Indian Studies is to create knowledge that is relevant to and engages with American Indian peoples and nations outside the academy. I actually think we need to challenge the idea that community is somehow separate from the academy. We also need to remember that it takes all kinds of different people with different gifts and

specialties to create a whole. There are many layers when it comes to sovereignty. There is a personal sovereignty or personal autonomy but then there is also political sovereignty at the level of nations, not to mention intellectual sovereignty and visual sovereignty. These discourses are all interrelated and impact each other. Arts and literature are some of the main ways that we can create concepts and express who we are—the resulting artworks being acts of sovereignty. Art and politics have many interesting connections. The ratified *Constitution of the White Earth Nation*, Chapter 3 “Rights and Duties,” Article 5 reads: “The freedom of thought and conscience, academic, artistic irony, and literary expression, shall not be denied, violated or controverted by the government.” So these freedoms will protect politically when or if the constitution is implemented. The document demonstrates that, at White Earth, we recognize the importance of artistic expression—and that that expression is political and, at times, controversial. It is important to protect expression because it can lead to revolution. Anishinaabe writer and theorist Gerald Vizenor was the lead writer of the document and it was thrilling to work with him on this important project. In some ways the constitution is itself a story—it tells who we are or at least who we want to be at White Earth. This political document shows our values, beliefs, and priorities. I would love for an artist from White Earth to do a set of paintings or sculpture or something inspired by the document. Vizenor has written also that “We make ourselves whole in the world with words.” As the foundational governing document, the words of the constitution are a creation story.

DM: *Do you see the artist or writer as having any particular political role in asserting Anishinaabeg identity?*

JD: White Earth has an amazing array of scholars including Gerald Vizenor, Gordon Henry, Kimberly Blaeser, and many more—too many to try name here. These writers both create and assert identity in their writing. I think that several contemporary authors from White Earth are attempting to “defang the monster” of blood quantum, a constant reminder of colonialism. They use literature to render blood quantum powerless as a method to define who is and who is not Anishinaabe. White Earth Anishinaabeg have utilized literature as a tool to critique the concept of blood quantum and to assert ways of determining and understanding identity that are not based on biological race. Their stories engage in *survivance* and promote Anishinaabe conceptions of identity. I just finished an essay examining how Ignatia Broker challenges blood quantum in *Night Flying Woman*. She repeatedly asserts that “Ojibway tales teach a philosophy for living,” and “it is important that you learn the past and act accordingly, for that will assure that we will always people the earth.” Broker calls readers into action and places a responsibility on them. She also creates a relationship because she frames herself as the reader’s grandmother. Kimberly Blaeser’s poetry and critical work is wonderful. With regard to identity, I think of her poem “Certificate of Live Birth: Escape from the Third Dimension” and the way the narrator claims that a mis-checked box on a birth certificate is “my heritage more truly than any account of bloodlines.” Here we get the idea that identity (or heritage) is about relationships and history.

Gerald Vizenor has done so much to challenge the pseudo-scientific idea of blood quantum. His work is so important. Personally, I go back to the first time I read his work. I was a freshman at the University of Minnesota-Morris and we read *Trickster of Liberty* for my "Introduction to Native American Literature" class. I was quite literally blown away. The characters were beyond definition—there was no tragedy and everything was modern—or perhaps post-modern. The book opens with Luster Browne who provides a view opposing blood quantum and allotment policy. The association of Luster with *mongrels* calls attention to his mixed ancestry. He sneers at federal agents, showing resistance but also defiance and survivance. His ability to nurture his children and grandchildren overturns the "racial hocus-pocus" that was invented by non-Indians. This ability of those defined by the federal government as "mixed-blood" to survive and create new generations is a reversal of blood quantum; survivance in its finest form. Rejecting the idea that those who are "mixed-blood" cannot create new generations of Indian people, this story works against the idea of racial and cultural purity. Vizenor's use of "racial hocus-pocus" to describe blood quantum calls to mind magic and challenges its supposed scientific basis. Equating blood quantum with magic takes away its power, making it a mere hoax.

Additionally, Luster's act of "pissing on the birch" with the mongrels is representative of territorial marking. This marking may be a call to return to communal land holding. Of course, the act of "pissing" also gives the reader a not-so-subtle clue to how the author feels

about allotment, and evokes humor as a tool to argue against blood quantum and allotment. The reference to the "scratch line" calls to mind the scratches that the anthropologists used to determine the blood quantum of individuals during the early twentieth century. The association between the "scratch line" and the "land allotment measures" cleverly figures both as inventions of the federal government, and implies that both allotment and blood quantum are tools of dispossession. Measurement of blood quantum fixed the land base with the population at White Earth at that time, and reserved no additional lands for future generations or expanded populations. Similarly, as a racial concept, blood quantum quickly declines for future generations if both parents are not from the same tribe. Vizenor's story highlights the connections between the divisions of land holdings and the division of blood by the federal government and envisions a way to resist and overturn the division of land and blood in coming generations. Importantly, it encourages the Anishinaabeg to resist the dictates of the federal government and to take back control through positive action. There is no real harm done to anyone in Luster's story; rather than focusing on revenge, Luster succeeds by taking control of his life and refusing to participate in the systems of colonization offered by the federal government. As Broker might say, Luster acts accordingly and therefore ensures the survivance of the Anishinaabeg.

White Earth also has many amazing visual artists. I think of Frank Big Bear's work and his amazing use of color and shape. I think his work is very modern and defies static and tragic images of "the Indian,"

which is still prevalent today. Many of his works have a kind of fractured look but they also remind me of quilts and ways in which our identities consist of many imperfect pieces but all somehow fit together. All the small pieces come together to form something beautiful. I also like his self-portrait in which there are vines covering his skin. It is kind of like a camouflage—bringing the idea that we can't really "see" him and I also think it could be interpreted as a relationship to land; a connection between body and earth.

DM: *Does **White Earth** offer any examples that may re-conceptualize how we see Native history?*

JD: I think Native history is constantly being re-conceptualized in many different ways by many different people. Native history has predominantly been focused on victimization and that is the story that I learned in high school and is probably still being taught in many high schools but the field of Native history has changed. Native history is not just history—going back to the idea of tribalography—the past, present, and future are not distinct but interrelated. We are now telling our own histories and stories and also much of the work being done by non-Indians has also changed significantly. I was very privileged to study under White Earth Anishinaabe professor Jean M. O'Brien. She was generous, supportive, and (in a good way) challenging. Her book *Firstling and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence* was recently published and is amazing. In this book, she really on the whole idea of the "vanishing Indian" and demonstrates how European Americans' refusal to acknowledge the modernity

of American Indians results in this huge American myth. Americans wanted to tell a story in which Indians were absent and they did so—by telling the story many people today still think that "real" Indians no longer exist. Even though the book focuses on New England, it offers many valuable tools for how we can re-conceptualize and re-create Native history. I cannot recommend the book enough.

DM: *Do you have any closing thoughts . . .*

JD: I am part of the first generation raised with the idea that I could do anything. I could be anything I wanted to be. It was a powerful story. My mother was not raised with that but she gave me the gift of imagination and has been a constant source of support. Even though I didn't necessarily "see" lots of Anishinaabeg in my own everyday life doing amazing things—that is to say that what I mostly saw was high unemployment and poverty—I nonetheless believed her. She would read to me for hours. Her patience and dedication was its own story. There is nothing more important than our families; they tell us the stories that make us who we are. As scholars we must ask: What stories do we want to tell?