



“The Last Lecture on the Edge”: American Indians are not Invented for Public Consumption

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Abstract: “The Last Lecture on the Edge” is a chapter from American Indian writer Gerald Vizenor’s novel *The Trickster of Liberty*. The chapter tells a story which happened on the edge of the White Earth Reservation where anyone who wanted to drop over the edge can deliver a last lecture. This article mainly analyzes the lectures delivered by the first three lecturers Marie Gee Hailme, Coke De Fountain and Homer Yellow Snow. This article explores how the chapter satirizes those who utilize Indianness and Indian identity for public consumption. It is argued that Marie Gee Hailme overemphasizes the purity of Indianness and Indian values in Indian school education. She is stubborn to stick to her opinions towards education and tries to consume the education of the Indian kids. Coke De Fountain is considered in this article as a selfish mixblood who consumes Indian kids by selling drugs to them for his own interests. It is also pointed out that Homer Yellow Snow is a pretend Indian author who consumes his spurious identity and readers’ trust.

Keywords: Gerald Vizenor; *The Trickster of Liberty*; *The Last Lecture on the Edge*; indian identity; Indianness

Publication date: December, 2020

Publication online: 31 December, 2020

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1 Introduction

Born in Minnesota in 1934 and growing up on the White Earth Reservation, Gerald Vizenor is an enrolled member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe from the White Earth Reservation. He is an author more than 30 books of poetry, books and literary

criticism (Knittel 23). Vizenor’s work has been described as tribal-cum-postmodern (Foley 305) and in his work, he makes use of trickster stories more than any other contemporary American Indian writer in some sense (Helstern 351). Lewis Owens writes, “Vizenor is the first American Indian author to find crossbloods a cause for joyous celebration. The most ambitious and radically intellectual of American Indian writers, Vizenor has taken Indian fiction, and the figure of the mixed blood in particular, into the future” (Owens 254). In his highly imagistic poetry, he employed the haiku form, which is an influence from his experience of serving in the armed force for three years in Japan. He has wrote three novels, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), *Griever: A Monkey King in China* (1987), and *The Trickster of Liberty* (1988). “The Last Lecture on the Edge”, a chapter from his novel *The Trickster of Liberty*, takes place on the edge of the White Earth Reservation. One can make one last telephone call to the past on the Last Lecture, which is a circular cedar structure with a bar, booths and a theater and then dropped over the edge into a new wild world. Five people in total including the Father Mother delivered their speech on the Last Lecture. Based on the method of close reading, this article analyses the lectures given by Marie Gee, Coke De Fountain and Homer Yellow Snow to explore how “The Last Lecture on the Edge” satirizes those who utilize Indianness and Indian identity for public consumption.

2 Marie Gee: an educator who overemphasizes the purity of Indian education

Marie Gee Hailme is the first one to deliver her last lecture. She is a mixedblood educator with a dark

skin in charge of developing classroom materials about Indians in a public school. In her lecture, all she says concentrate on her main argument that “the tribal values she had introduced in classrooms were amiss and biased”. What she thinks is correct is to “trust the education of their children to pigmentation”, which means that the education of Indians should adhere to Indianness and Indian values. However, when she lectures the Indian values to help the white teachers understand the behaviors of the “real Indians”, there are actually no such kind of Indian students as she described. Her values are like inventing a tribe. The values she would like to imposed on the Indian students are on the opposite side of the education that she has been ordered to give and the Indian students would not understand her teaching, either. Marie Gee hopes that the next generation of Indian students should accept the Indian values like them, the first generation, but she could neither fit in the current educational environment nor change the situation. She chooses to complain about the past and leave the reservation.

From the perspective of cultural identity theory, cultural identity is not only the emotional connection formed by specific ethnic groups or cultural groups through inheritance, but also the result of social construction (Hu Yuping 124). To overemphasize the relationship between Indian education and its cultural identity will lead to the imbalance between the development of Indian culture and mainstream culture, and may lead to the continuous marginalization of Indian groups, which is not conducive to the development of multi-cultural society. The development of Indian education should take the advantage of the white culture as well as discard the disadvantages of Indian cultural values. However, Marie Gee is a typical one who overemphasizes the Indianness and Indian values of the education towards Indian students and she seeks the purity of Indian values in the Indian education. The examples that the author listed in the chapter, “Indians never look you in the eye and Indians never touch”, are obviously not positive values, but she still lectures that “basic values and behavior of Indians” to the white people. She always tries to consumes the Indian education with her own stubborn thoughts. Vizenor also uses her name to satirize her stubbornness of the

purity of Indian education. “Hailme” means “praise me”. She always thinks she is right and is always disappointed with her colleagues, her students and the society. She at last has to choose to leave the reservation.

3 De Fountain: a selfish mixblood who consumes Indian kids

Coke De Fountain is an urban pantribal radical and dealer in cocaine. In his last lecture, he mentions the Wounded Knee, which is the 1890 massacre between Native Americans and representatives of the U.S. government. In his point of view, the Indians of his generation took part in the Wounded Knee Massacre for the elders in order to make the elders proud again. The reason why he wants to leave the reservation is that he thinks Indians of his generation always have to listen to the elders and protect their sacred traditions. He also tries to talk about racism and genocide in his last lecture. However, he is actually not that kind of virtuous people who really make efforts to save the Indian kids or care about the future of the Indian people. The elder and the tribal woman who interrupt him speak out the truth in the chapter. De Fountain accuses the elder of not saving the kids. However, he sells drugs to the kid, which is obviously not a proper way to teach the kid how to hate. Moreover, he ostensibly teaches the kids to hate the whites, but, just as the tribal woman says, he lets a white foster family care for his children while he parade around and hate whites”. The elder also sharply points out that his sinful nature that he never did anything for anyone and he entered the Wounded Knee just for his own interests, money and women. It can also be found that whenever others expose his hidden tricks, he would evade and talk about his virtuous thoughts. Besides, from the description of his action in the end of his lecture, which are the verbs, “threw”, “sneered”, “slammed”, “hurried”, the author also depicted the image of a rude and selfish man who cares less about the feeling of others.

Vizenor here portrays Coke De Fountain as a typical one of the selfish Indians who only cares about his own interests and feeling during the development of the tribe and consumes his compatriots. The people of this kind would not really care about Indian kids not the past and the future of the Indian people. They

claim they hate the white but are actually white in mind.

4 Yellow Snow: a pretend Indian author who consumes his spurious identity and readers' trust

Homer Yellow Snow is a spurious tribal author who is a white man but pretends that he has the Indian identity and invents his own Indianness. He invented his tribal experiences and his stories on the reservation. Just as what he says in his confession, my blood recollections were artificial. He has consumed his readers' trust for a long time until a mixblood writer challenged his autobiographical essay and questioned his tribal identity. His invented stories finally have been seen through and he has to discard his pretentious Indian identity. The most disgusting thing is that in his confession, there is no sense of guilty. Instead, he sneers that the Indian culture is easily duped. Although he introduced himself as "author, artist, historian, tribal philosopher", he consumes the Indian identity and does not revere the real history and life of the tribe.

Vizenor portrayed Homer Yellow Snow as a typical one of those who does not really revere and are not loyal to the Indian culture. The Indianness and Indian values in these people's mind are artificial or can be easily shook and duped. They will never stick to even his motherland's identity and values. Wherever the interests lie, whichever value their mind will identify. This kind of people consumes the Indian identity for profits instead of really caring about the interests of the tribe, which is satirized by the author.

5 Conclusion

"The Last Lecture on the Edge", written by Gerald Vizenor, is a chapter from his novel *The Trickster of Liberty*. The author uses the pun in the title of the chapter, "the Last Lecture" is not only the physical place which was built on a watershed below the scapehouse at the south end of the baronage, but also the last lecture delivered by anyone who would

choose to leave the reservation. "The Edge" is not only the stone precipice behind the tavern, but also the edge of their identity. The chapter also adopts the multiple narrative voice strategy. In the chapter, five lecturers including the Father Mother voice their opinions in their last lectures. This article mainly analyzes the first three lecturers Maire Gee Hailme, Coke De Fountain and Homer Yellow Snow. It is argued that Marie Gee Hailme is a stubborn educator who seeks the purity of the Indianness and Indian values in Indian school education. She tries to change the thoughts of the white teachers and consume the kids as she wishes but she could not change anything. She is a typical one of those Indians who would only care about their own feelings but would not take the development of Indian school education into consideration. Coke De Fountain is a selfish mixblood who only cares about money and women. He ostensibly teaches the kids to hate the white but he is actually consuming the kids. He is yellow outside but white and venal inside. It is pointed out that Homer Yellow Snow is a pretend Indian who consumes his fake Indianness and his readers' trust. He only leaves the tribe until his real identity was challenged. The author portrays the first three lecturers to satirize those who utilize the Indianness and Indian identity for public consumption.

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