



4. Aesthetics of Survivance

Theories of survivance are elusive, obscure, and imprecise by definition, translation, comparison, and by catchword histories, but survivance is invariably true and just in native practice and cultural company. The nature of survivance is unmistakable in native songs, stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions, customs, and clearly observable in narrative sentiments of resistance, and in personal attributes such as the native humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage. The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence and actuality over absence, nihility, and victimry.

Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent. Survivance is greater than the right of a survivable name.

Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, destractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry. Survivance is the heritable right of succession or reversion of an estate, and, in the course

Aubid, who was eighty-six years old at the time, testified through translators that he was present as a young man when the federal agents told Old John Squirrel that the *anishinaabe* would always have control of the *manoomin* harvest. Aubid told the judge that the *anishinaabe* always understood their rights by stories. John Squirrel was there in memories, a storied presence of native survivance. The court could have heard the testimony as a visual trace of a parole agreement, a function of discourse, both relevant and necessary.

Justice Lord agreed with the objection of the federal attorney, that the testimony was hearsay and not admissible, and explained to the witness that the court could not hear as evidence what a dead man said, only the actual experiences of the witness. “John Squirrel is dead,” said the judge. “And you can’t say what a dead man said.”

Aubid turned brusquely in the witness chair, bothered by what the judge had said about John Squirrel. Aubid pointed at the legal books on the bench, and then, in English, his second language, he shouted that those books contained the stories of dead white men. “Why should I believe what a white man says, when you don’t believe John Squirrel?”

Judge Lord was deferential, amused by the analogy of native stories to court testimony, judicial decisions, precedent, and hearsay. “You’ve got me there,” he said, and then considered the testimony of other *anishinaabe* witnesses.¹

Monotheism is hearsay, the literary concern and ethereal care of apostles, and the curse of deceivers and debauchery. The rules of evidence and precedent are selective by culture and tradition, and sanction judicial practices over native presence and survivance.

Survivance is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory. The theory is earned by interpretations, the critical construal of survivance in creative literature, and by narratives of cause and natural reason. The discourse on literary and historical studies of survivance is a theory of irony. The incongruity of survivance as a practice of natural reason, and as a discourse on literary studies, anticipates a rhetorical or wry contrast of meaning.

Antoine Compagnon observes in *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense* that theory “contradicts and challenges the practice of others,” and that ideology “takes place between theory and practice. A theory would tell the truth of a practice, articulate its conditions of possibility, while an ideology would merely legitimate this practice by a lie, would dissimulate its conditions of possibility.”

Theory, then, “stands in contrast to the practice of literary studies, that is, literary criticism and history, and it analyzes this practice,” and “describes them, exposes their assumptions—in brief, criticizes them (to criticize is to separate, discriminate),” wrote Compagnon. “My intention, then, is not in the least to facilitate things, but to be vigilant, suspicious, skeptical, in a word: critical or ironic. Theory is a school of irony.”²²

Bear Traces

The presence of animals, birds, and other creatures in native literature is a trace of natural reason, by right, irony, precise syntax, by literary figuration, and by the heartfelt practice of survivance.

Consider a theory of irony in the literary studies of absence and presence of animals in selected novels by Native

placed his heart on my breast. It has entered there, and there it shall remain.”⁴

Metaphors are persuasive in language, thought, and action. “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” and “not merely a matter of language,” observed George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*. “Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness. These endeavors of the imagination are not devoid of rationality; since they use metaphor, they employ an imaginative rationality.”⁵

Metaphors create a sense of presence by imagination and natural reason, the very character and practice of survival. The critical interpretation of native figurations is a theory of irony and survival. The studies of oratory and translation, figuration, and native diplomatic strategies are clearly literary and historical, text and context, and subject to theoretical interpretations.

N. Scott Momaday, for instance, created a literary landscape of bears and eagles in his memoirs and novels. “The names at first are those of animals and of birds, of objects that have one definition in the eye, another in the hand, of forms and features on the rim of the world, or of sounds that carry on the bright wind and in the void,” declared Momaday in *The Names*. “They are old and original in the mind, like the beat of rain on the river, and intrinsic in the native tongue, failing even as those who bear them turn once in the memory, go on, and are gone forever.”⁶

Clearly, metaphors provide a more expansive sense of

to face now and then,” Momaday told Charles Woodward in *Ancestral Voices*.¹⁰

Momaday became a bear by visionary transformation, an unrevealed presence in his novel *House Made of Dawn*. Angela, the literary voyeur, watched Abel cut wood, “full of wonder, taking his motion apart. . . . She would have liked to touch the soft muzzle of a bear, the thin black lips, the great flat head. She would have liked to cup her hand to the wet black snout, to hold for a moment the hot blowing of the bear’s life.” Later, they came together, in the bear heat of the narrative. “He was dark and massive above her, poised and tinged with pale blue light.”¹¹

Leslie Silko encircles the reader with mythic witches, an ironic metaphor of survivance in *Ceremony*. The hard-hearted witches invented white people in a competition, a distinctive metaphor that resists the simulative temptations of mere comparison of natives with the structural extremes of dominance and victimry.

“The old man shook his head. ‘That is the trickery of the witchcraft,’ he said. ‘They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place.’”¹²

Louise Erdrich created tropes in her novel *Tracks* that are closer to the literal or prosaic simile than to the metaphors that inspire a sense of presence and survivance. She names

heedless, one man placed his hand on the deer, and in an “instant it was running.” The men “hook their fingers” on the fence “and watch the deer bound down the weedy and trash-strewn slope to the freeway and into the traffic.”¹⁶

Treuer, who slights the distinct character of native literature, pronounced the deer dead in five pages, and evoked a weighty metaphor of want and victimry. The scene of the deer astray in rush hour traffic is obvious, portentous. The intention of the author is clear, a dead deer. The choice disheartens, and yet appeases by the familiar simulations of sacrifice. That emotive scene provokes the pity and sympathy of some readers, those who may concede the simulations of victimry. Surely, other readers might imagine the miraculous liberty of the deer by natural reason and survivance.

The *Hiawatha* closes in a second person crescendo of nihility. “You move stones with your feet but there is no impression, no remnant of your life, your action. Whatever you do is not accommodated, it is simply dropped onto the hard earth you pass. You will be forgotten. Your feet, your hands are not words and cannot speak. Everything we accumulate—our habits, gestures, muscles trained by the regimen of work, the body remembering instead of the mind—it is of no use.”¹⁷

House Made of Dawn by N. Scott Momaday, as a comparison, ends with a song, a sense of presence and native survivance. Abel “was alone and running on. All of his being was concentrated in the sheer motion of running on, and he was past caring about the pain. Pure exhaustion laid hold of his mind, and he could see at last without having to think. He could see the canyon and the mountains and

Treuer shows his own intentional fallacy that counters silky ideas about literature, style, and identity. The symbol of a broken feather enhances the cover of his book, a trace of image and identity politics, and the biographical note that he is “Ojibwe from the Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota,” implies that he would rather favor being read for his ethnicity.

So, if there is *only* literature by some dubious discovery of the “true value” of the cold, white pages of style, then there is no sense of native presence and survivance. Treuer teases the absence of native survivance in literature, but apparently he is not an active proponent of the death of the author. Surely, he would not turn native novelists aside that way, by the ambiguities of cold print, only to declare, as a newcomer, his own presence as a native author.

Tragic Wisdom

Native American Indians have resisted empires, negotiated treaties, and, as strategies of survivance, participated by stealth and cultural irony, in the simulations of absence to secure the chance of a decisive presence in national literature, history, and canonry. Native resistance of dominance, however serious, evasive, and ironic, is an undeniable trace of presence over absence, nihilism, and victimry.

Many readers consider native literature an absence not a presence, a romantic levy of heroic separatism and disappearance, and others review native stories as cryptic representations of cultural promises obscured by victimry.

The concurrent native literary nationalists construct an apparent rarefied nostalgia for the sentiments and structures of tradition, and the inventions of culture, by a reductive

reading of creative literature. The new nationalists would denigrate native individualism, visionary narratives, chance, natural reason, and survivance for the ideologies that deny the distinctions of native aesthetics and literary art. Michael Dorris, the late novelist, argued against the aesthetic distinctions of native literature. Other authors and interpreters of literature have resisted the idea of a singular native literary aesthetic.

Native literary artists, in the furtherance of natural reason, create the promise of aesthetic sentiments, irony, and practices of survivance. The standard dictionary definitions of survivance do not provide the natural reason or sense of the word in literature. Space, time, consciousness, and irony are elusive references, but critical in native history and literary sentiments of the word *survivance*.

The sectarian scrutiny of essential individual responsibilities provokes a discourse of monotheist conscience, remorse, mercy, and a literature of tragedy. The ironic fullness of original sin, shame, and stigmata want salvation, a singular solution to absence and certain victimry. There is a crucial cultural distinction between monotheism, apocalypticism, natural reason, and native survivance.

Dorothy Lee observed in *Freedom and Culture* that the “Dakota were responsible for all things, because they were at one with all things. In one way, this meant that all behavior had to be responsible, since its effect always went beyond the individual. In another way, it meant that an individual had to, was responsible to, increase, intensify, spread, recognize, experience this relationship.” Consider, for the “Dakota, to be was to be responsible; because to be was to be related; and to be related meant to be responsible.”

Personal, individual responsibility, in this sense, is communal, and creates a sense of presence and survivance. Responsibility, in the course of natural reason is not a cause of nihilism or victimism. “The Dakota were responsible, but they were accountable to no one for their conduct,” wrote Lee. “Responsibility and accountability had nothing in common for them. Ideally, everyone was responsible for all members of the band, and eventually for all people, all things.”

Yet, Lee declared, no “Dakota was accountable to any one or for any one. Was he his brother’s keeper? Yes, in so far as he was responsible for his welfare; no, in so far as being accountable for him. He would never speak for him, decide for him, answer prying questions about him. And he was not accountable for himself, either. No one asked him questions about himself; he gave information or withheld it, as his own choice. When a man came back from a vision quest, when warriors returned, they were not questioned. People waited for them to report or not as they pleased.”²⁰

Original, communal responsibility, greater than the individual, greater than original sin, but not accountability, animates the practice and consciousness of survivance, a sense of presence, a responsible presence of natural reason, and resistance to absence and victimism.

Survivance is related to the word *survival*, obviously, and the definition varies by language. The *Robert & Collins dictionnaire français–anglais, anglais–français* defines survivance as a “relic, survival; cette coutume est une survivance de passé this custom is a survival ou relic from the past; survivance de l’âme survival of the soul (after death), afterlife.” The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines survivance as the “succession to an estate, office, etc., of a survivor

francophonie” by Patrick Griolet, reviewed by Albert Valdman in *Modern Language Journal*, 1989.

Ernest Stromberg, in the introduction to his edited collection of essays *American Indian Rhetorics of Survivance*, declared that “‘survivance’ is the easiest to explain,” but he does not consider the compound history of the word. “While ‘survival’ conjures images of a stark minimalist clinging at the edge of existence, survivance goes beyond mere survival to acknowledge the dynamic and creative nature of Indigenous rhetoric.”²² Stromberg does not cite, consider, or even mention, any other sources, exposition, or narratives on survivance. His rhetoric on survivance is derivative.

Clifford Geertz used the word *survivance* in a structural sense of global differences, the “recurrence of familiar divisions, persisting arguments, standing threats,” and notions of identity. Geertz declared in *Available Light* that a “scramble of differences in a field of connections presents . . . a situation in which the frames of pride and those of hatred, culture fairs and ethnic cleansing, *survivance* and killing fields, sit side by side and pass with frightening ease from the one to the other.”²³ *Survivance*, printed in italics in his personal essay, is understood only in the context of an extreme structural binary.

“Each human language maps the world differently,” observed George Steiner in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. He relates these “geographies of remembrance” to survivance. “Thus there is, at the level of human psychic resources and survivance, an immensely positive, ‘Darwinian’ logic in the otherwise battling and negative excess of languages spoken on the globe. When a language dies, a possible world dies with it. There is no survival of the

that may of course turn out to have a long life) or in the return of everything that deterred us from a certain kind of Marxism and a certain kind of Communism.” Derrida seems to use the word *survivance* here in the context of a relic from the past, or in the sense of an afterlife.²⁶

Derrida, in *Archive Fever*, comments on a new turn of forms in the recent interpretations of *Moses and Monotheism* by Sigmund Freud, the “phantoms out of the past” compared to the form of a “triumph of life.” Derrida observed that the “afterlife [survivance] no longer means death and the return of the specter, but the surviving of an excess of life which resists annihilation.”²⁷

Derrida would surely have embraced a more expansive sense of the word *survivance*, as he has done by the word *différance*. Peggy Kamuf pointed out in *A Derrida Reader* that the suffix *-ance* “calls up a middle voice between the active and passive voices. In this manner it can point to an operation that is not that of a subject or an object,” a “certain nontransitivity.”²⁸ *Survivance*, in this sense, could be the fourth person or voice in native stories.

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