# 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, detractions, 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

of international declarations of human rights, a narrative estate of native survivance.

## Fourth Person

Charles Aubid, for instance, declared by stories his native presence, human rights, and sovereignty. He created a crucial course and sense of survivance in federal court and defied the hearsay of historical precedent, cultural ethnologies, absence, and victimry.

The inspired storier was a sworn witness in federal court that autumn more than thirty years ago in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He raised his hand, listened to the oath for the first time in the language of the *anishinaabe*, Chippewa or Ojibwe, and then waved, an ironic gesture of the oath, at United States district judge Miles Lord.

Aubid testified by visual memory, an inseparable sensibility of natural reason, and with a singular conception of continental native liberty. His stories intimated a third person other than the apparent reference, the figurative presence of a fourth person, a sui generis native discourse in the oral language of the *anishinaabe*.

That native practice of survivance, the storied presence of a fourth person, a visual reminiscence, was repudiated as hearsay, not a source of evidence in common law or federal court precedent.

Aubid was a witness in a dispute with the federal government over the right to regulate the *manoomin*, wild rice, harvest on the Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Minnesota. Federal agents had assumed the authority to determine the wild rice season and regulate the harvest, a bureaucratic action that decried a native sense of survivance and sovereignty.

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 parol 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.

Charles Aubid created indirect linguistic evidence of a fourth person by visual reminiscence. His stories were intuitive, visual memories, a native sense of presence, and sources of evidence and survivance.

## Natural Estates

The native stories of survivance are successive and natural estates. Survivance is an active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry.

The practices of survivance create an active presence, more than the instincts of survival, function, or subsistence. Native stories are the sources of survivance, the comprehension and empathies of natural reason, tragic wisdom, and the provenance of new literary studies.

Native storiers of survivance are prompted by natural reason, by a consciousness and sense of incontestable presence that arises from experiences in the natural world, the turn of seasons, sudden storms, migration of cranes, the ventures of tender lady's slippers, chance of moths overnight, unruly mosquitoes, and the favor of spirits in the water, rimy sumac, wild rice, thunder in the ice, bear, beaver, and faces in the stone.

Survivance is not a mere romance of nature, not the overnight pleasures of pristine simulations, or the obscure notions of transcendence and signatures of nature in museums. Survivance is character by natural reason, not by monotheistic creation stories and dominance of nature.

Survivance stories create a sense of presence and situational sentiments of chance. Monotheism takes the risk out of nature and natural reason and promotes absence, dominance, sacrifice, and victimry.

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."[2]

## 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

American Indians. The creation of animals and birds in literature reveals a practice of survivance, and the critical interpretation of that literary practice is theory, a theory of irony and native survivance. Verbal irony is in the syntax and ambiguous situations of meaning, absence, and presence, as one concept turns to another.

The *anishinaabeg*, for instance, are named in "several grand families or clans, each of which is known and perpetuated by a symbol of some bird, animal, fish, or reptile," observed William Warren in *History of the Ojibway Nation*. The *ajijaak*, or crane totem, is the word for the sandhill crane, a dancer with a red forehead, and a distinctive wingbeat. "This bird loves to soar among the clouds, and its cry can be heard when flying above, beyond the orbit of human vision." Warren, an *anishinaabe* historian, declared more than a century ago that native crane leaders in "former times, when different tribes met in council, acted as interpreters of the wishes of their tribe."[3]

Keeshkemun, an orator of the crane totem at the turn of the nineteenth century on Lake Superior, encountered a British military officer eager to enlist native support for the war. Michel Cadotte translated the stories of the orator. Keeshkemun created an avian presence by his totemic vision and natural reason.

"I am a bird who rises from the earth, and flies far up, into the skies, out of human sight; but though not visible to the eye, my voice is heard from afar, and resounds over the earth," said Keshkemun.

Englishman, "You have put out the fire of my French father. I became cold and needy, and you sought me not. Others have sought me. Yes, the Long Knives found me. He has

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 survivance. The critical interpretation of native figurations is a theory of irony and survivance. 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

signification and literary survivance than simile. John Searle argued in "Metaphor" that the "knowledge that enables people to use and understand metaphorical utterances goes beyond their knowledge of the literal meaning of words and sentences." Searle declared that a "literal simile" is a "literal statement of similarity" and that "literal simile requires no special extralinguistic knowledge for its comprehension."[7]

Metaphor is that "figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another," observed Janet Martin Soskice in *Metaphor and Religious Language*. The "greatest rival of metaphor, simile, in its most powerful instances does compel possibilities. Simile is usually regarded as the trope of comparison and identifiable within speech by the presence of 'like' or an 'as,' or the occasional 'not unlike.'" Simile, she argued, "may be the means of making comparisons to two kinds, the comparison of similars and dissimilars, and in the latter case, simile shares much of the imaginative life and cognitive function of its metaphorical counterparts." However, simile cannot "be used in catachresis," the excessive or misuse of words. Simile cannot create the lexicon, as does "dead end" or the "leaf of a book."[8]

James Welch, for instance, created a precise sense of presence, a landscape by simile. "Tumble weeds, stark as bone, rocked in a hot wind against the west wall," and, "I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon," he wrote in *Winter in the Blood*.[9]

I "have this bear power. I turn into a bear every so often. I feel myself becoming a bear, and that's a struggle I have

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 similative 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

moose, bears, cats, and other animals, but the most common is the dog. For instance, "she shivered all over like a dog," and, she "leaned over the water, sucking it like a heifer," and, his "head shaggy and low as a bison bull."[13]

David Treuer created a few animals and birds in his novel *The Hiawatha*. Deer, mallards, and a goose kill in the city. Conceivably, only the curious, astray, and then dead deer, an erudite sacrifice, was necessary. That scene in the first few pages becomes the singular metaphor of the novel, a sense of absence and melancholy. Any sentiments of native survivance are overturned by woe and mordancy. The omniscient narrator alleged, "So memory always murders the present."[14] Many of the scenes are heavy, overbooked irony. The natives and other characters, however, arise with glory and grandeur as construction workers on a skyscraper, a material metaphor of survivance, but grounded they are separated, dissociated, tragic, and enervated by cultural dominance, nihility, and victimry.

"The earth would treat them with the same indifference as loose steel, a dropped hammer, a windblown lunch," wrote Treuer in *The Hiawatha*. "This was the secret: the building wanted to stay standing, to grow, to sway but hold on, and so did they." The "tower wanted to be noticed and admired, as did the Indian crew. Its bones of steel and skin of glass were treated roughly by the wind, heat, and ice as were their skin and bones."[15]

March, the streets are "dirty with sand," and homeless men reach out to touch a wild deer astray in a "church parking lot." Truly, a tensive scene as the men reach out in silence to warm their hands on the deer, hesitant, and the deer walks untouched through a "channel of men." Then,

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

the sky. He could see the rain and the river and the fields beyond. He could see the dark hills at dawn."

Abel "was running, and under his breath he began to sing. There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song. And he went running on the rise of the song. *House made of pollen, house made of dawn*."[18]

Treuer declared in *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* that native fiction, "if there is such a thing," should be studied as literature, and, by "applying ourselves to the word, and, at least at the outset of our endeavors, by ignoring the identity of the author and all the ways the author constructs his or her authority outside the text, we will be better able to ascertain the true value of that text."

The "true value" of any text is elusive, as truth is only the ironic intention of the author, and, forevermore, the consciousness of the reader. Treuer creates a fallacy of the "true value" of literature, and he seems heartened by the implied death of the author, and by the strains of formalism and erstwhile New Criticism. Yet, he does not appear to be haunted by the wake of literary intentionalism, or the implied intentions of the native author. "Over the past thirty years, Native American fiction has been defined as, exclusively, literature written by Indians," he noted. The sentiment, however, that "Native American literature should be defined by the ethnicity of its producers (more so than defined by anything else) says more about politics and identity than it does about literature. This is especially true, and especially clear, when we see that our books are constructed out of the same materials available to anyone else. Ultimately, the study of Native American fiction should be the study of style."[19]

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, nihility, 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 nihility or victimry. "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 victimry.

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

nominated before the death of the previous holder; the right of such succession in case of survival." And *-ance*, the suffix, is a quality of action, as in *survivance*, *relevance*, *assistance*. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines the suffix *-ance* as a "state or condition," or "action," as in *continuance*. Survivance, then, is the action, condition, quality, and sentiments of the verb *survive*, "to remain alive or in existence," to outlive, persevere with a suffix of survivancy.

The word *survivance* has been used more frequently in the past few years, since the publication of *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* and *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* by the University of Nebraska Press. "Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name," I wrote in *Manifest Manners*. "Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivancy."[21]

The word *survivance* has been used in many titles of essays and at least one recent book. Anne Ruggles Gere, for instance, used the word in the title of her essay "An Art of 'Survivance,' Angel DeCora of Carlisle," in *American Indian Quarterly*, 2004. Rauna Koukkanen, "'Survivance,' in Sami and First Nation Boarding School Narratives," *American Indian Quarterly*, 2003.

*Survivance*, the word, is more commonly used in the political context of francophone nationalism and the Québécois in Canada. Other instances of the word include "Cadjins et creoles en Louisiane. Histoire et survivance d'une

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

fittest. Even where it is spoken by a handful, by the harried remnants of destroyed communities, a language contains within itself the boundless potential of discovery, or re-compositions of reality, of articulate dreams, which are known to us as myths, as poetry, as metaphysical conjecture and the discourse of law."[24]

Steiner considered the aesthetic experience of survivance in the responses of readers, listeners, and viewers to music, painting, and literary art. "Responding to the poem, to the piece of music, to the painting, we re-enact, within the limits of our own lesser creativity, the two defining motions of our existential presence in the world: that of the coming into being where nothing was, where nothing could have continued to be, and that of the enormity of death," he wrote in *Real Presences*. "But, be it solely on a millennial scale, the latter absolute is attenuated by the potential of survivance in art. The lyric, the painting, the sonata endure beyond the life-span of the maker and our own."[25]

Jacques Derrida used the word *survivance* once in a collection of essays and interviews, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews*. The interviewers for the monthly review *Passages* continued a point about Karl Marx and Marxism, and asked Derrida if he would be "surprised if there were some kind of return—in a different form and with different applications—of Communism, even if it is called something else? And if what brought it back were a need within society for the return of a little hope?"

Derrida responded, "This is what we were calling justice earlier. I do not believe there will be a return of Communism in the form of the Party (the party form is no doubt disappearing from political life in general, a 'survivance'

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.