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## Preface Tragic Wisdom and Survivance

Deborah L. Madsen

The guiding principle of the *Native Traces* book series is the concept of survivance, developed by Gerald Vizenor and exemplified by Joëlle Rostkowski's conversations with a series of extraordinary Native Americans. Survivance is not a static object or method but a dynamic condition of historical and cultural survival and also of political resistance: an epistemology, an ontology, and an axiology. Survivance is the continual assertion of non-territorial Native sovereignty, which the interviewees in this book describe as the condition of their lives as artists, writers, journalists, lawyers, and activists.

Survivance, as a structuring epistemological principle, is political, cultural, and aesthetic, a resistance and counter-interpretation that constantly seeks to expose the workings of dominant colonialist ideologies in the production of everyday meanings. Survivance refuses the easy acceptance of the “commonsense” interpretation of the world that supports what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls the “possessive logic” of nation-state sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> Vizenor describes this interpretative resistance as the “un-saying” of the world and the corresponding effort to speak it “otherwise” in Native terms.<sup>2</sup> In this way, survivance counters the epistemology of disavowal that characterizes settler relations with Native peoples. Freud's concept of disavowal names a psychological process of simultaneous acknowledgment and denial, characterized by knowing what is actually the case but behaving as if it were otherwise. Disavowal is a defensive function that allows the rejection of some perception of reality because, if accepted as real, that perception would threaten the integrity of an existing worldview. In the context of US settler colonialism, the history of Native dispossession is both acknowledged and denied, for example in the official legal doctrines of “discovery” and “conquest” that regulate relations between the federal and tribal governments. Survivance rejects the historical and cultural narratives that deny a Native sense of presence, a presence that preceded and endures despite colonial settlement. These narratives write Native communities into a condition of absence – a disavowed presence – and as perpetual victims lacking individual and communal agency. However, as Gerald Vizenor tells Joëlle Rostkowski in the interview published here, “The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence, a critical, active presence and resistance, over absence, historical and cultural absence, nihility and victimry.”

Suzan Harjo expresses what is a common experience among the interviewees here when she tells how this character of survivance was articulated to her in her childhood by family and teachers who “told me that white people would try to break my spirit, just as they had twisted history. ... I was always prepared for outsiders to try to make me and our Native peoples into lesser beings, and to resist them and to prevail.”

The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) is an institution inspired by the sentiment of survivance. Indeed, the permanent exhibits are structured around the central assertion

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- 1 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Terra Nullius and the Possessive Logic of Patriarchal Whiteness: Race and Law Matters' in Rosemary Hunter and Mary Keyes, ed. *Changing Law: Rights, Regulation and Reconciliation* (Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), p. 124.
  - 2 Gerald Vizenor, “Crows Written on the Poplars: Autocritical Autobiographies” in B. Swann & A. Krupat, ed. *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers* (pp. 99-110). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 105.

of ongoing Native presence and one of the installations, included in the permanent exhibit *Our Lives*, prominently displays Vizenor's definition of survivance. The NMAI presents visitors with a succession of survivance narratives which, like the stories told in the conversations presented here, testify to the falsity of dominant narratives that emphasize Native victimry and absence. As Richard West, the founding Director of the NMAI, remarks in his interview, "We conceived a Museum that was to become not only a cultural space but also a community centre. To the consternation of some people it has asserted its difference, its specificity as a civic space where one is confronted not only with native objects but also with the native experience." This Native experience – this Native epistemology or worldview – is inseparable from the objects that constitute the museum's collection. West explains that "Objects tell a story. They have a language. To interpret the objects, you need to know the history of the communities and the meaning of the ceremonies. They sometimes have a spiritual dimension that exceeds their aesthetic value." This recognition of the epistemological power of survivance, enacted in the mission and structure of the NMAI, makes of the museum what West calls "a safe place for unsafe ideas": a place where "Native peoples can interpret their cultural inheritance and contemporary lives."

The bringing of a living Native cultural inheritance into the contemporary moment is a key survivance move. Emil Her Many Horses describes, from his perspective as a permanent curator at the NMAI, the practical challenges and efforts to develop the inaugural exhibitions, singling out "the section *Our Universes*, [where] we stressed native philosophies, indigenous cosmologies, traditional ways of explaining the creation and order of the universe." This emphasis on Native epistemology and worldview is described also by Sven Haakanson, Director of the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak Alaska, who explains "I know how important it is to make things, to transmit knowledge through the actual objects, through gestures, through active participation, through the sharing of knowledge by getting each person to create a piece. This experience links them to our history in ways only creating can – one on one and hands on."

For Richard West, this survivance hermeneutic works through the objects of the NMAI collection; elsewhere, Gerald Vizenor describes this same epistemology operating through a lexicon of "shadow words" that elude and exceed the conceptual reach of European discourses. This vocabulary of survivance endures as the "tragic wisdom" that the tribes have achieved through the difficult history of European contact, one of the many traces of tribal presence that Vizenor describes as "the remanence of intransitive shadows."<sup>3</sup> An intransitive verb has no object; an intransitive shadow has no object but is only itself. Literally, "remanence" signifies the magnetic force that remains within an object once the external magnetizing field has been removed. This is a powerful metaphor for an understanding of Native identity that is not a shadow of something from the past, something that came before, but is its own self and remains its own integral self despite the comings and goings of external forces. Native tribal identity sustains itself independently of European influences. More than this, however, the metaphor suggests that European discourses, in the presence of Native cultures, acquire Native elements that remain as remanences even after Native communities have been removed to the margins of the dominant society. Though Native American writers, journalists, lawyers, politicians, and artists may use the English language, the language that they use is infused with the survivance of Native tribal cultures. Words like "remanence" can, within a survivance hermeneutic, signify meanings that cast metaphorical lexical shadows across accustomed meanings and stories that support dominant forms of nation-state sovereignty.

Survivance is a Native form of telling history. For example, for nearly a decade Vizenor campaigned for the University of California at Berkeley to recognize the service provided to the university by the last Yahi man, Ishi. In 1992, Vizenor wrote to the Chancellor that "the very institutions and the foundational wealth of this state are based on stolen land and the murder of

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3 Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), p. 63.

tribal people.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, in 1993, the central courtyard of Dwinelle Hall was named “Ishi Court.” At the dedication ceremony, Vizenor angrily declared: “There is a wretched silence in the histories of this state and nation: the silence of tribal names. The landscapes are burdened with untrue discoveries. There are no honorable shadows in the names of dominance. The shadows of tribal names and stories persist, and the shadows are our natural survivance.”<sup>5</sup> Again, Vizenor uses the image of shadows to suggest the suppressed histories that endure in words and especially in names. In the names that the state buildings do in fact bear is the disavowed colonial history of theft and murder; the unspoken shadow meanings of these names are not “honorable.” However, in the name “Ishi Court” is to be found the remanence of Native presence and a reminder of the enduring Native possession of place.

The limited understanding of history supported by the names assigned to places and buildings by the state is symptomatic of the limitations of European epistemologies acknowledged within a survivance worldview. It is the understanding of the limits of settler knowledge that provides the basis for survivance in its original French meaning. *Survivance* signifies the qualification to inherit an estate and formal recognition of the legal status of a survivor. Or, in Vizenor's words to Joëlle Rostkowski, “[s]urvivance ... 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.” What this means in a Native context is the readiness of individuals and communities alike to continue the transmission of tribal cultures, values, and knowledges to future generations, through international and domestic legal instruments, through creative storying in literature, art, music, and through the practices of everyday life.

Sven Haakanson relates how his grandmother spoke to him in the Alutiiq language that was denied his parents; Scott Momaday talks here about the personal confidence and communal traditions he inherited from his parents. Momaday speaks also of his personal commitment to the passing on of this inheritance, in part through the establishment of the Buffalo Trust, the objective of which he describes as “to revive traditional culture, to reinforce the dialogue between generations.” He continues, “I want to foster the development of local archives where oral tradition can be preserved, native stories video-taped and where young people could have access to computers, where they could listen to old tales told by elders and, in a very casual way, rediscover their roots.” Momaday's strategy of bringing the past into the present by imagining oral stories told via computer is a survivance strategy of preserving the past not in some nostalgic and static history but in the modern present. Survivance here is much more than survival or physical endurance; survivance is a Native way of knowing that signifies a sustaining, living, tribal presence now and in the future.

The epistemological claim for the power of survivance is intrinsically connected to a creative, transformative ontological practice. Survivance is not only a way of interpreting through resistance, that resistance itself creates the world it brings into being through counter-narratives. Like the “earthdivers” of Anishinaabe storying, those who see the world in terms of survivance recreate that world anew. But this renewed world is that of enduring tribal presence, the tribal estate inherited and instantiated through survivance. The often baroque, often satirical works by Anishinaabe artist David Bradley exemplify this act of counter-storying. The narrative paintings that express Bradley's ironic vision see the world in the terms of a Native ontology. His Native re-appropriation of iconic historical moments inverts the priorities that structure a colonialist vision of reality. Bradley's 1982 painting “How the West was Lost,” for example, reverses the terms of the phrase “How the West was Won.” The subversive power of Bradley's work arises from his ability to put into conversation opposing notions of the real and to give priority to the Native. As he tells

4 Quoted in Louis Owens, “The Last Man of the Stone Age: Gerald Vizenor's *Ishi and the Wood Ducks*” in A. Robert Lee, ed. *Loosening the Seams: Interpretations of Gerald Vizenor* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 2000), p. 236.

5 Ibid., p. 237.

Jöelle Rostkowski, “I perceive myself both as an artist and as an Indian Rights activist inviting collectors and art lovers to reconsider history and contemporary society.”

A foundational aspect of survivance ontology is the refusal to accept western linear time or calendar time, over tribal understandings of time. Suzan Harjo responds to the question concerning the important events that shaped her life by recalling her ancestors and events that happened before her lifetime like the Sand Creek Massacre and the Battles of Little Bighorn and Palo Duro Canyon. She explains, “In the Cheyenne language, we have no past tense. Only Is and Is Coming. It means that what happened in the past is still present in your consciousness and in your life. The Muscogee have known the Battle of Horseshoe Bend and the Trail of Tears. These still are on our minds. Things that happened before my lifetime actually are happening to me.” The present reality of what in European terms is represented as the past constitutes a fundamental distinction between Western and Native ontologies.

The articulation of a tribal ontology within the context of survivance necessarily involves the representation of transformation, whether between western and tribal understandings of the nature of time, or the interchangeable transformations of the human into animal and animal into human, or the transformation of the nature of place through Native geographical movement. Vizenor's concept of “transmotion” names these survivance practices of transformation. Native transmotion is a practice of ontological transformation that overcomes the separations imposed by a colonial ontology or worldview. More than this, Native movement is an assertion of presence that is neither granted nor controlled by the state; as Vizenor asserts, “Motion is a natural human right that is not bound by borders.” Tribal movement, then, is an assertion of political sovereignty independent of the provisions of colonialist treaties. Treaties regulate sovereignty over land but not over people so transmotion is a survivance strategy and assertion of this Native sovereignty of the people.

Travel, both within the United States and internationally, marks the careers of many of the people interviewed here. David Bradley tells how his travels with the Peace Corps in Guatemala, Haiti and Costa Rica, along with his interest in Eastern European and Asian painting, broadened the experience that informs his art. Tony Abeyta explains how his formation as an artist developed through his movement from Santa Fe to Baltimore, then to New York and Chicago, and was further inspired by his travels in Europe, particularly France and Italy. He describes how “I create from a Native American vocabulary but I am inspired by the knowledge I have acquired from other parts of the world, and from various periods of art history.” For Native artists like Bradley and Abeyta, cosmopolitan experience facilitates a Native transformation of the Western artistic heritage, revising the nature of the reality created through those works of art. The creation of transformative art is a survivance practice.

Vizenor's concept of “fugitive poses” describes another form of survivance as an axiology, a mode of being or state of analytical consciousness. His book *Fugitive Poses* is subtitled *Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence*, evoking the terms of the dynamic relationship between absence and presence, colonialism and tribalism, dominance and survivance, that shape the possibilities for Native identities. The absence of real Native people from nation-state histories creates a double absence when real Natives are represented instead by the invented figure of the “Indian.” While the destructive cultural effect of Native stereotypes is indisputable, Vizenor draws attention to tribal people who have created out of these impossible stereotypes of Indians who never existed new possibilities for living on their own terms. The simulated Indian offers material from which to construct a discursive defense or shield, under cover of which survivance identities can flourish. In his autobiography, *Interior Landscapes*, Vizenor writes of his grandmother Alice Beaulieu who practiced survivance under cover of “fugitive poses.” He tells how she and her much younger, blind husband would travel by bus into the Minneapolis suburbs and, selling brushes door-to-door, would engage lonely housewives in creative and life-sustaining storytelling.

Louisita Warren in her interview tells Jöelle Rostkowski how some members of her pueblo

coped with the imposition of Catholicism by adopting a “fugitive pose”: “some of us became very devout Christians, without necessarily giving up their traditional religion. But, for many others, conversion has been merely a screen, an acceptance hiding real beliefs. ... My uncle used to tell me that Christianity was like a coat that we could wear to hide our traditional clothes.”

The emphasis upon everyday practices represents survivance as an axiology with profound epistemological and ontological capacities to bring into a condition of presence the enduring indigeneity of Native America. Taking the heritage of tribal resistance and endurance into the modern world is a survivance axiology. This resistance involves challenging the demeaning racist imagery of Indian stereotypes promoted, for example, through sports mascots and conservative museum policies. Jill Momaday explains that she left the acting profession after she realized that, “being a native girl, I would be confined inevitably to a representation of some stereotypical image or role: Indian princess or hooker. The interesting parts were not there.” Veronica Velarde Tiller, a Native American historian, explains in her interview that “The historical perception of Native Americans, all the stereotypical images conveyed by history books has had a major impact on the way we have been perceived by other Americans. We are still seen as a dependent people and I wanted to say that there is another perspective. We, as Native Americans, must write our own history and stories. We must get the message out through all forms of media, through books, through documentation on the Internet, cable TV, films, workshops and at meetings.” Mohawk educator, journalist, and United Nations representative Kenneth Deer's work had advanced this survivance practice not only through First Nations Native education but also through his creation of the newspaper *The Eastern Door*. He explains that he established this Native newspaper “because there was no information in mainstream media on Kahnawake or on matter of interest to us. Most information in the mainstream was generally sensationalist and inaccurate.”

In addition to the effort to reclaim the full range of possibilities for Native identity, survivance practices also include important work to reclaim tribal lands, to revitalize Native languages, to defend historic treaty rights, to obtain legal protection for sacred places, to support tribal sovereignty in gaming legislation, and to achieve improvements in education and healthcare. Erma Vizenor's account of her courageous struggle against corruption within tribal governance, and her election as the first woman to lead the White Earth Nation, demonstrates that the resistance foundational to survivance must be practiced in both tribal and non-Native contexts.

In this way, survivance is not a return to the past in the manner of nostalgia or misplaced romanticism; rather, survivance is a mode of being and acting in the world that continually seeks to reconcile living tribal values with the reality of modernity. But this process of reconciliation is grounded in the critical consciousness of tribal ontology and epistemology. Reconciliation in the context of survivance is the opposite of assimilation, where change occurs on the colonizer's rather than tribal terms. Métis dancer and choreographer Rulan Tangen explains how the mission of her company, “Dancing Earth, Indigenous Contemporary Dance Creations,” is to create hybrid performances with “interwoven philosophies, mixing various indigenous cultures.” This is not a pan-Indian effort; rather, she describes how “Our message tends to be inter-tribal. The dancers would be recognizable through their hairstyle, whether it is Mohawk, Apache, or Lakota. We would be mixing elements from three or four tribes and weave them all together in a performance that would express our common concerns, our determination to cling to our roots, to remain faithful to our cultures.”

The legal instruments created in response to Native activism represents another important aspect of the work of survivance to inscribe the Native presence that is integral to contemporary society. Among the extraordinary people interviewed in this book are those activists whose work resulted in legislation such as the National Historic Preservation Act (1966, amended 2006), the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978), the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990), the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (1990), and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

The founder and Executive Director of the Indian Law Resource Center, Tim Coulter, tells the story of his role in the formulation of the UN Declaration, starting with his part in the drafting of a Declaration of Principles, submitted at a major 1977 conference hosted by the United Nations in Geneva concerned with discrimination against the indigenous peoples of the Americas. He continues his story through the granting of NGO status to the Indian Law Resource Center, the establishment of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and his work on the UN Declaration. Coulter's story is in conversation here with Kenneth Deer's narrative of his involvement with the UN, especially during the Oka Crisis of 1990, and his work as coordinator of the Indigenous Caucus of both the Working Group on Indigenous Populations and the Working Group on the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Survivance insists that the image of the "Indian" evoked in colonialist discourses is a dangerous and damaging construction of the European imagination. The "Native" is real and present in the context of tribal heritage expressed through endurance, survival, resistance, and the readiness to inherit and pass on this Native tribal presence. Survivance is Native sovereignty; in the conversations that follow, Joëlle Rostkowski encourages her interviewees to explore their experience of survivance through the diverse aesthetic, cultural, and political contexts in which they have lived. The stories told by these remarkable people underline the changes wrought in the conditions of Native America in the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. That these changes are the result of intense commitment and struggle, emerges from the personal stories we are privileged to hear. But these stories are always also communal stories based on the tribal inheritances that have been preserved and passed down through the generations. These are survivance stories informed by what Gerald Vizenor calls "tragic wisdom": the knowledge gleaned by tribal communities after centuries of dealing with colonialist nation-state governments.

Tim Coulter's assessment of the current state of indigenous rights is sobering: he describes how "Indian people are no longer hunted down and shot in South America. Massacres are now relatively infrequent. I am grateful for that, truly. Many countries now accord self-determination to indigenous peoples and respect (more or less) their land and resource rights. Indigenous peoples now have a permanent right to exist as peoples. These are historic advances in our civilization. Here, in the US, very little has improved, and much has grown worse. Obama has done nothing of significance yet, but I continue to be hopeful." The refusal to surrender hope in the face of insights arising from tragic Native wisdom, is a survivance signature. Tim Coulter's sentiments are also Kenneth Deer's. Despite the advances in federal and international law, Kenneth Deer observes, "The issues between our Peoples and the Canadian and US governments still remain unresolved. Efforts to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into mainstream society and eliminate our legitimate right to exist as Peoples continue to plague us." He concludes, "It seems our destiny is to continue to struggle to survive. We must raise our children and our grand-children to continue to struggle. If we ever stop struggling, then we will disappear." Resistance, persistence, endurance: these are fundamental to survivance as a mode of knowledge, a vision of reality, and a way of living in the world. Many interviewees tell how they benefited from the resistance of their parents and grandparents against overwhelming assimilative pressures. This resistance is a powerful inheritance that has been lived out in the lives told in Joëlle Rostkowski's book. The stories narrated in these interviews constitute survivance as an unceasing assertion of Native sovereignty.