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Ainu and Anishinaabe Stories of Survivance: Shigeru Kayano, Katsuichi Honda, and Gerald Vizenor

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A cross-cultural approach to reading and writing about indigenous literature contributes to the ongoing survival of native cultures. Narratives of survivance not only make a claim for the active presence of indigenous peoples (in opposition to the stereotypical notion of “vanishing peoples”), but also function as an act of resistance to dominant cultural narratives.

Keywords: Ainu, Anishinaabe, survivance, resistance, domination, Manifest Destiny, indigenous peoples.

In 1976 Naohika Hashine, an Ainu from Ainu Moshir, was imprisoned in Japan for protesting the way in which the Ainu were being treated by the Japanese government. From prison, Naohika Hashine wrote a letter to the Kootenay Indians in the United States to express solidarity with the Kootenay Nation. Hashine writes:

I am an Ainu presently imprisoned in one of the prisons in Japan. I should like to express my solidarity and support for our comrades of the Kootenay nation from Ainu Moshir. In the Ainu language [Ainu Moshir] means the Ainu nation. However the Ainu Moshir differs from such states as Japan or the United States in that it does not make distinctions between people of different cultures...We have never possessed nature nor have we turned it into “our territory.” We have not established a system in which man controls man. Nature and the earth belong to nobody, because they are living as we are living. Nature and the earth are our mother that has given birth to us and helped us grow up. It is but the [Japanese] that chopped up into pieces the mother nature and earth, controlled and destroyed them under the name of “possessions.” The [Japanese] killed and enslaved the Ainu.

Hashine’s expression of solidarity, here, is entirely appropriate, as the history of the struggle between the Ainu and the Japanese mirrors in significant ways the ongoing conflict between American Indian nations within the United States and the U.S. government. The Ainu nation and American Indian nations, for example, continue to exist in a state of paracolonialism, in which indigenous peoples live alongside their colonizers but the colonizer’s history, government, social structure, language and culture remain dominant. Under such conditions, given the dominant culture’s need to assimilate and thus erase the presence of ethnic minorities, the ability of indigenous peoples to maintain their own histories, language, and culture is extremely difficult. In this essay I will address the ways in which Gerald Vizenor, in *Hiroshima Bugi*, Katsuichi Honda, in *Harukor: An Ainu Woman’s Tale*, and Shigeru Kayano, in *Our Land Was a Forest: An Ainu Memoir*, use a cross-cultural approach to literature to

contribute to the ongoing survival of Anishinaabe and Ainu culture. I will then go on to argue for the importance of listening to and learning from their stories, or what Gerald Vizenor calls “narratives of survivance.”

“Survivance” is a word coined by Gerald Vizenor, a mixedblood Anishinaabe writer/scholar/activist born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1934. “Survivance,” for Vizenor, means “survival” plus “endurance,” and is used to describe the ways in which minority cultures—through storytelling, ceremonies, and community—continue to exist and even flourish despite the pressures of assimilation. As Vizenor writes, in *Fugitive Poses*, “survivance, in the sense of native survivance, is more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence...The native stories of survivance are successive and natural estates; survivance is an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (15). Narratives of survivance, then, not only make a claim for the active presence of indigenous peoples (in opposition to the stereotypical notion of “vanishing peoples”), but also function as an act of resistance to dominant cultural narratives.

The history of the Americas over the past five hundred years is a record of Euro-American barbarism toward indigenous peoples. To forget that history, or elide it from Western discourse, is just genocide by other means. But the dominant (“white”) discourse in the United States continues to perpetuate the notion that “Indians” are a thing of the past, a historic relic of the earliest days of the Republic. This story is important if the myth of “Manifest Destiny”—a kind of divinely sanctioned westward expansion—is to continue to have any meaning. “Manifest Destiny” is an ideological tool used to justify the unlawful acquisition of indigenous or foreign lands and to insist (often by force) that the natives adapt to Euro-American culture. In order to “kill the Indian” but “save the man,” Indian children were torn from their families and sent to boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak their language or practice their customs; thus, education became the primary means by which the U.S. government tried to eradicate indigenous cultures. While ultimately the U.S. government did not succeed, much damage was done trying. Scholars have estimated the pre-contact (that is, pre-1492) number of Indians living within the borders of the present-day United States at twelve million. But due to genocide and death by diseases brought to the shores of America by the colonizers, by 1890 that number had dropped to 250,000. According to the 2006 Census, the number of American Indians living in the U.S. is roughly 2.8 million and rising.

Japan has its own version of Manifest Destiny, but before moving west into Asia, Japan expanded its colonial powers northward, annexing Hokkaido in 1873. In every respect, Hokkaido is “a Japanese version of the American western frontier” (Lie 92). Since the Meiji period, the Japanese government has made a concerted effort to destroy the Ainu way of life by turning the Ainu, who lived by hunting and fishing, into farmers and assimilating them into Japanese culture. Following the passage of the 1899 Hokkaido Aborigine Protection Act, the “Ainu people were forbidden to fish, barred from cutting trees, and banned from speaking their native language” (92). The period of assimilation, roughly 1899-1968, was a time when the “master narrative” of Japan as a homogenous society was able to effectively take root (Siddle 17). As Richard Siddle argues, “at the level of commonsense understanding a master narrative of seamless national homogeneity denies the existence of the Ainu as an ethnic minority group; the Ainu are regarded as either totally assimilated or biologically extinct” (17). But despite the continued denial of ethnic minorities in Japan, the Ainu, and other indigenous peoples, maintain

an active presence throughout Nippon. In 1993, for example, the number of people in Hokkaido who self-identified as Ainu was 24,381, “a figure which according to the Ainu ought to be around 300,000” (Sjoberg 152). The number is low, they argue, because many Ainu are unwilling to register *as* Ainu because they disapprove “of the ways in which their situation is officially handled” by the Japanese government (152).

What is clear, here, is that the history of native peoples in the U.S. parallels the history of the native peoples of the Japanese archipelago. In both cases, “the native economy, culture, and nation were destroyed; the indigenous people suffered from disease and exploitative pioneers and were later confined to a small landmass; and the winners got to write history” (Lie 92). But for every master narrative written by the winners, there are myriad counter-narratives that tell different stories, stories which have been deliberately prevented from entering, in this case, mainstream Japanese and American views of history. These counter-narratives are what Howard Zinn would call the “people’s history,” that is, history from the perspective of the “losers,” those whose economy, culture, and nation were overrun by a colonial power.

Writers like Shigeru Kayano, Katsuichi Honda, and Gerald Vizenor give voice to those who have been written out of history and thus make important contributions to the Ainu and Native American counter-narratives that continue to be written. Vizenor’s novel *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (2003) is especially interesting because it makes explicit the link between the Ainu and the Anishinaabe (the Native American tribe to which Vizenor belongs). In *Hiroshima Bugi*, which Vizenor calls a kabuki novel, the protagonist, Ronin, is a “hafu,” or mixedblood/hybrid, whose father, Nightbreaker, was an *anishinaabe* from the White Earth reservation, in the U.S., and whose mother, Okichi, a “bugi” dancer, might have been an Ainu from Hokkaido. The unnamed narrator of the novel informs readers that “the Ainu are the indigenous natives of the islands of northern Japan,” and that “the Ainu and the *anishinaabe* told similar stories about natural reason, their creation, animal totems, and survivance” (51). Like the *anishinaabe*, the Ainu presume “that everything in nature, be it tree, plant, animal, bird, stone, wind, or mountain, has a life of its own and can interact with humanity” (51). The Ainu “tease their origins in the presence of *kamuy* spirits,” what the *anishinaabe* call *manidoo*, and both the Ainu and the *anishinaabe* “create in their stories a culture of survivance” (137).

In *Hiroshima* Vizenor, through Ronin, puts Shinto in dialogue with indigenous *anishinaabe* beliefs, showing that cross-cultural contact does not destroy “traditional” beliefs but rather is essential for survivance in millennial postmodernity. In Shinto “there are no monotheistic creators, no grave founders, no sacred scriptures, no authoritarian doctrines, and no sincere notions of almighty dominance” (63). As in the *anishinaabe* belief system, Shinto “honors the *kami*, the mountains, animals, rivers, stones, and more” (63). In *The People Named the Chippewa*, Vizenor tells us that the *anishinaabe* trickster figure, Naanabozho (a name that evokes *nanazu* water tricksters), “is related to plants and animals and trees; he is a teacher and healer in various personalities who, as numerous stories reveal, explains the values of healing plants, wild rice, maple sugar, basswood, and birch bark to woodland tribal people” (3-4). And as Ronin tells the narrator, “the Shino *kami* and the *anishinaabe* *manidoo* are common ancestors in my dreams’ [...] Animals and birds are the primary source of his visions” (Vizenor, *Hiroshima* 64). By merging *anishinaabe* beliefs with Eastern indigenous epistemologies, *Hiroshima Bugi* manifests

Vizenor's cross-cultural dialogic approach to literature.

Like Vizenor, Shigeru Kayano and Katsuichi Honda, in *Our Land Was a Forest: An Ainu Memoir* and *Harukor: An Ainu Woman's Tale*, respectively, similarly engage in cross-cultural dialogue. Because the Ainu, like the anishinaabe, transmitted their cultural heritage orally, based on memory, Kayano's memoir was necessarily written in Japanese; and "once the oral tradition enters into dialogue with the rhetorical systems of the Western" or Eastern tradition, the "text" becomes a "product of the conjunction of cultural practices and hybridized discursive modes" (Pulitano 81). Katsuichi's work is especially interesting in this respect. While Katsuichi's *Harukor* was also written in Japanese, Katsuichi asks us to imagine that the narrative has been translated from Ainu. He asks us, in other words, to imagine the story is being recounted orally. In keeping with the oral tradition, then, he uses the "form of the *uwepeker*, a narrated life story, to relate the exploits of" Harukor, an Ainu woman living in Hokkaido over five hundred years ago (Honda 89). By asking readers to imagine they are "hearing" Harukor's story being told orally in Ainu, Katsuichi's narrative enacts a dialogic approach to storytelling. And in this sense, he has much in common with Vizenor, who "shapes his words in the oral tradition" (Vizenor, *Wordarrows* vii). Vizenor, Katsuichi, and Kayano invest "the written form and [their] own creative works with the qualities and the power of the oral" (Blaeser 16). By doing so, these writers are able to maintain the semblance of an oral culture, while, at the same time, promoting and promulgating anishinaabe and Ainu beliefs in and to a world that privileges the written word over speech.

It may be argued that by assuming the voice of an Ainu woman, in *Harukor*, Honda, a Japanese man, is "speaking for" the Ainu, which could be construed as colonialism by other means. But I would argue that Honda is "speaking with" and "speaking to" the Ainu. As Linda Alcoff writes, scholars "should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others" (23). Honda, then, is a Japanese scholar writing and acting in solidarity with the Ainu. His narrative contributes to the growing awareness of the Ainu in Japan, but it also emphasizes "the contribution of Ainu culture to Japan's (and the world's) response to environmental crises" (Howell xxv). Harukor's story shows the Ainu living in harmony with nature and, therefore, "offers a model that we can all learn from" (xxv). Ironically, it may just be the Ainu, those often referred to as "the dying people," who finally save the very people who tried to kill them from self-destruction.

Shigeru Kayano's *Our Land Was a Forest: An Ainu Memoir* is a narrative of survivance because it emphasizes the active presence of Ainu in Hokkaido. While Kayano does not deny or pass over the horrors his family suffered at the hands of the Japanese, his narrative speaks to the ways in which Ainu culture lives on. In his memoir, he recounts his family history; details the numerous jobs he worked to support himself; shares the basics of Ainu hunting wisdom, and pays homage to his grandmother who, by reciting Ainu epic poems and old tales, "securely passed down to [him] the great treasure of the Ainu people" (83). When Kayano, born in 1923, was in his early twenties, he, like many Ainu, rejected his Ainu heritage. This is not surprising given the overt discrimination the Ainu experienced: Ainu children, forced to attend Japanese schools, were teased; and adults were denied jobs just because they were Ainu. Eventually, though, Kayano "became actively conscious of [his]

Ainu roots” and “decided to start a collection of Ainu folk utensils, purchasing them [himself] to prevent them from being taken away [by scholars] for close to nothing” (100). Like indigenous peoples all over the world, Kayano hated anthropologists. As Kayano explains, “each time they came to Nibutani, they left with folk utensils. They dug up our sacred tombs and carried away ancestral bones. Under the pretext of research, they took blood from villagers and, in order to examine how hairy we were, rolled up our sleeves, then lowered our collars to check our backs, and so on” (98). But as Kayano came to terms with the fragility of Ainu culture, watching, as he did, some of the last native Ainu speakers die out, Kayano’s attitude toward Ainu scholars changed.

In 1957 Kayano met Chiri Mashihō, an Ainu “scholar committed to the proper transmission of Ainu culture” (112). Professor Chiri encouraged Kayano to document Ainu culture in meticulous detail, right “down to indelicate matters like what people of old used to wipe themselves” (115). Together, Professor Chiri and Kayano would record the Ainu language and make a documentary showing Ainu fishing by Ainu methods. Unfortunately, Professor Chiri died only three years after Kayano met him, but “during his lifetime,” Kayano writes, Professor Chiri “gave us Ainu a major objective and provided a role model: Because of the appearance of a great star called Chiri Mashihō, the Ainu people came to know and reflect on themselves” (115). Inspired by Professor Chiri, Kayano learned to carve a traditional fish-scale design on trays and he continued to collect Ainu folk pieces. In 1961, Kayano met Kindaichi Kyosuke, an Ainu scholar studying *yukar*, or Ainu epic poems. Together Kayano and Professor Kindaichi worked to insure that “Ainu and the *yukar* would...be properly transmitted for posterity” (131). To honor the work Professor Kindaichi did to preserve Ainu culture, in 1968 a Poetry Monument was erected in Nibutani. When Kindaichi Kyosuke died in 1971, he left behind “a massive amount of literature and data on the Ainu language as a legacy for the Ainu people” (132). The influence that Professors Chiri and Kindaichi had on Kayano manifested itself most visibly in 1971 when Kayano opened the Nibutani Museum of Ainu Cultural Resources.

Museums, of course, are a real source of controversy among indigenous peoples, because they isolate artifacts from their cultural context and promote the idea that the culture on display is dead and gone. But Kayano sees things differently. By working with Professors Chiri and Kindaichi and also Professor Otsuka Kazuyoshi of the National Ethnological Museum, in Osaka, Kayano learned that “the role of museums is not merely to collect existing artifacts but to revive and propagate forgotten crafts” (149). Museums can also promote living cultures, and one of the main purposes of the Ainu museum in Nibutani is to document both the past and the active presence of the Ainu in Hokkaido. Museums and, paradoxically, the tourist industry have contributed significantly to the preservation of Ainu culture. Kazuyoshi Ohtsuka writes,

many aspects of Ainu culture, including ceremonies, songs and dances, and handicraft techniques that have been passed down among the Ainu, were continued and passed on as part of the activities of museums and tourist areas. A few elders insisted that even those rituals staged as demonstrations at tourist areas were legitimate traditional ceremonies...It is not inaccurate to say that much of the extant Ainu culture consists of those traditions that have been maintained and passed down over the past hundred years within the context of touristic enterprises, most recently within Ainu museums and tourist centers. (95)

In other words, even if the Ainu are carving wood, “owning a curio shop, or being part of some recreated kotan (traditional Ainu villages), in which tourist[s] pay to enter thatch-covered dwellings with taped sounds of the mukhuri...and buy bear or owl carvings and nipopo dolls,” they are, in fact, *being* Ainu (de la Rupelle 23); and, as Guy de la Rupelle argues, “in the long run this may be more positive than anything else” (23).

I raise the issue of museums and the tourist industry, here, because Kayano has been criticized within his own community for the way he works to promote the Ainu. Some critics accuse him of “commercializing” Ainu culture, while others believe that making the argument that the Ainu are a distinct, self-contained ethnic group comprising the Ainu nation will only alienate them further from the Japanese. While I am in no position to make a case for or against Kayano, with regard to this issue, I do believe that debates and disagreements within ethnic communities are not only natural but sure signs that a culture is alive and well.

Whatever one thinks of Kayano, his memoir stands as a “monument to the Ainu” (Kayano 157). It testifies “to the history, ethos, customs, beliefs, hopes, and aspirations of a people whose way of life has been undermined” but *not* destroyed “by successive waves of invasion of their homeland by the Japanese” (Hane xi). Moreover, Kayano’s life and work speaks to the importance of working in solidarity with non-indigenous peoples to preserve indigenous culture. Katsuichi Honda’s *Harukor*, for example, demonstrates the sensitivity and care so-called “outsiders” can have when “speaking with” indigenous peoples. Outsiders can and do contribute constructively to the continuance of other cultures. In *Hiroshima Bugi*, Ronin tells the narrator that “the Japanese...have always been influenced by the outside, and at the most critical moments in their history” (205). Ronin claims that “theater, art, and literature were saved by outsiders. Faubion Bowers, for instance, saved the kabuki theatre during the [American] occupation” of Japan (205).

If there is an overarching lesson to be learned from the work of Vizenor, Kayano and Honda, it is that, in the 21st century, indigenous peoples and colonial powers must develop what Vizenor calls a “new consciousness of co-existence” (*Earthdivers* ix). As they encounter one another in the “contact zone,” where “conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” almost inevitably arise, colonizers and colonized must work together (Pratt 6). They must listen to, learn from, and develop a sincere respect for one another. Imperial hubris must give way to humility and understanding. Colonial powers must recognize that indigenous peoples have something vital to teach them, and that they ignore their stories of survivance at their own peril.

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