

# UCLA

## American Indian Culture and Research Journal

### Title

Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance. By Gerald Vizenor.

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/00t2x683>

### Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 34(3)

### ISSN

0161-6463

### Author

Krauthammer, Anna

### Publication Date

2010-06-01

### DOI

10.17953

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

be) extremely individualistic. As Mavis would be the first to tell you, Indian people on the river have many diverse opinions about things, and sometimes the person you least expect can teach you a lot.

A single example will show the practical value that references could provide. Mavis makes some comments about the Jump Dance that are undoubtedly true from her perspective but are likely to confuse the reader because she does not clarify the distinction between the public event and the esoteric aspects of the ritual that the public does not observe (24–25). An annotation would be useful here in order to provide more details and might also inform the reader that other Indian people from this area have described the purpose of the Jump Dance differently. At the very least there should be references to sources in which readers could find more information about the Jump Dance.

The publisher of *Medicine Trails* has been a pioneer and leader in books representing the Native American perspective for Indian people of California for many years, and it is possible that they wanted to avoid the academic tone that systematic use of annotations and references would have brought to the project. I feel that some attempt should have been made to recognize the published sources and address the difficult problem of reconciling contemporary beliefs and practices with earlier ones. I also think it was a bad decision not to include an index. A subject index would have been useful for anyone intending to use the book in future research.

*Richard Keeling*

Society for Ethnomusicology

**Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance.** By Gerald Vizenor. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 336 pages. \$30.00 paper.

This book is a collection of thirteen essays chosen from Vizenor's lectures, publications, and original work produced during the course of the last twenty years. They range from a consideration of Native aesthetics to legal issues, politics in the university, historical issues, personal experiences, and Vizenor's mixed-blood identity. These topics are blended seamlessly in each essay, which is a characteristic of all of Vizenor's works: the linking of disparate and destabilizing concepts, characters, events, and language, thus creating his own literature of resistance. The singular, most important aspect of this collection of essays is its accessibility. It is instructive and thought-provoking enough for the reader familiar with Vizenor's work and appropriate for the first-time reader as well. Vizenor's use of cultural, literary, and philosophical references alone provides an education for all readers. It is actually a good introduction to the various themes in Vizenor's fiction and nonfiction and can be the starting point for a study of Vizenor. Although the themes are somewhat repetitive, they are not redundant; they serve to remind and acclimate the reader to Vizenor's critical theories and his construction of a critical vocabulary with which the reader may not be familiar.

A recurrent major theme in the essays, and one that has permeated all of Vizenor's works, is his suggestion of a new critical lens for understanding Native American literature. He sees this literature as being linked to cultural survivance, rooted in nature (informed by what he calls "natural reason"), and supported by communal memory and interpretation. For Vizenor, this literature of cultural survivance stems from the Native desire for cultural and political sovereignty. His critical lens contains a new critical vocabulary as well, words appropriate for a separation from non-Native literary criticism that often results in the appropriation of Native texts. The words Vizenor creates illustrate his gift for using language that resists the terminal creeds of dominant culture and are designed to fit Native experience and aesthetics. They illustrate the liberty of Native self-definition and autonomy. They emphasize Native ownership of Native texts. We are introduced to the terms *storier*, *survivance*, and *victimry*. He extends the meanings of the words *absence* and *presence* to connote the marginalization of Native culture and otherness, and the Native struggle to resist this marginalization that defines Native people as invisible or other. Above all, the term *native reason* drives his analysis of the structure and content of Native texts as strategies of cultural survivance.

Several essays continue this theme of the use of natural reason to shape cultural survivance and resistance narratives. In his essay "Mr. Ishi in California," Vizenor calls Ishi a "storier of survivance," stating that he created songs and stories of natural reason, survivance, and liberty, and that nature was his source of presence and actuality (246). This portrait recalls another essay, "Ishi Obscura," in which Vizenor describes Ishi staring behind or beyond the camera that tries to fix his image and, by implication, define his identity. In order to drive home the destructive difference between Ishi's natural liberty and the intentions of those who would circumscribe it, Vizenor contrasts Native use of natural reason in order to assert identity with the separation from native reason by anthropologists "by their count and comparable measures of culture and history" (247).

Vizenor underlines the importance of stories as narratives of resistance in "Ontic Images" when he states, "Native identities are created in names, stories, the tease of remembrance and the natural traces of the seasons" (163). He thus underscores the attempt to offset the inscription of Native identity. It is also in this essay that he suggests that the word *survivance* refers not only to the basic physical sense but also carries with it a sense of endurance and perhaps ultimately the hope of prevalence. Survivance includes the establishment of an ongoing Native presence that works against absence and victimry.

A number of works examine the same connections that Vizenor makes and stress the need for a new Native American literary canon, buttressed by a new Native American literary criticism canon. Jace Weaver, Craig Womack, and Robert Warrior's *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (2006) and David Treuer's *Native American Fiction* (2006) examine this need and stress the link between community and literature. John Lloyd Purdy's *Writing Indian, Native Conversations* (2009) includes an interview of Vizenor that is illuminating in terms of various tropes not fully explored in the collection: the role of the trickster in Native culture and literature, comic holotropes that exist more

fully in Vizenor's earlier novels and in *Narrative Chance* (1993). They are solid works that extend the implications of Vizenor's work, and sometimes supply alternative constructs, but do not include his range of personal inflections or creative vocabulary that distinguish the radical, innovative nature of his analysis. The proliferation of Native critical texts in general points to a positive development in the field of Native-centered literary criticism as it applies not only to the creation of texts but also to the ownership of their analysis as an extension of a larger move toward cultural sovereignty.

Vizenor presents his predominant theme of Native literature as cultural survivance in the introduction, an invaluable essay in its own right: "Native storiers create at their best a singular presence by natural reason, customary words, perceptive tropes, observant irony and imagic scenes. That aural sense of presence is the premise of a distinctive aesthetics of survivance. . . . The narrative of survivance creates a sense of narrative resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihilism and victimry" (1). Vizenor sees the creation of Native literature not only as reactive but also as proactive and as designed to throw off and withstand the creation of absence, marginalization, and simulation of Native existence by dominant (non-Native) literature. He makes it clear that natural reason shapes Native literature and enables it to serve the function of resistance. He describes natural reason: "Native stories of survivance are prompted by natural reason, by a consciousness and sense of incontestable presence that arises from experiences in the natural world" (88). All things in nature and the transcendence of the natural world are intrinsic themes in Native literature, and natural reason is the basis of this literature's construction. Furthermore, for Vizenor, Native literature is a literature of cultural survivance because it opposes the victimry of science, theory, measure, definition, and precision and supports visionary clarity, subtlety, intuition, and ambiguity.

The collection ends fittingly with the elegant, evocative essay "Haiku Traces," which links haiku and Anishinaabe dream songs. Vizenor uses his own experiences, his own critical theory, and Japanese and Anishinaabe cultural references in order to show how haiku and the dream songs are related through their use of natural reason. The essay describes how his understanding of haiku informed his understanding of the songs and Native American literature as survivance literature.

He revisits themes in the other essays but also supplies a grace and beauty reflected in the examples of haiku and the songs that are not emphasized in the other essays. It is this sense of beauty, predominantly emotional and intuitive, that is often overlooked in so many critical texts that stress theory. This evocative quality of the essay is developed primarily through excerpts of Vizenor's own poetry and other haiku excerpts. Like his description of the open-ended, progressive, dynamic qualities of haiku and the dream songs, he structures this last essay so that the reader is left with the same sense of continuity, with a text that flows and unfolds, primarily driven by an interior sense of natural reason (266).

In this final essay, Vizenor places his own poetry within the same aesthetic framework: "My very first literary creations were haiku scenes, and ever since then that imagistic presence of nature has always been present in my

writing. . . . In this way my sense of presence experience and survivance is in nature and the book” (261). “Nature and the book” is a fitting description of the focus of this collection of essays.

*Anna Krauthammer*

New York City College of Technology

**Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic.** By Michael F. Steltenkamp. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009. 296 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

Nicholas Black Elk today is certainly one of the best-known Native American authors. Well—is he really? *Black Elk Speaks*, the book that made his name famous after his death in 1950, is silent about his Christian name Nicholas and the 1906 baptism during which he received it. To what extent, and in what sense, is he the person speaking in *Black Elk Speaks*? Is it his life story “as told to” (orig. ed., 1932) or “as told through” (1961) his interviewer John G. Neihardt? What, then, is the life story behind *Black Elk Speaks*? In recent years, these questions have been discussed from various points of view, and Michael Steltenkamp deals with them in a well-informed, sincere, and balanced way that offers new insights into the extraordinary personality of this Lakota holy man, Black Elk. Steltenkamp’s aim is to write a biography of Black Elk, “a full portrait” of his whole life, and not just of one-third of it, as Neihardt did (xix). This biographical approach instantly makes it clear that Black Elk’s singular achievement was about taking responsibility for his people in order to help them to live in an extremely changing world: as a young warrior, a healer, a showman in Europe, a ghost dancer, a catechist with the Catholic missionaries, and, later in his life, an active and patient resource person for white authors. All of these experiences, roles, and activities followed this principle, and to single out one and ignore others is a great injustice to Black Elk. I see the greatest value of Steltenkamp’s book in his convincing demonstration of the cohesiveness of the various aspects of Black Elk’s life, and his argument that to declare these aspects contradictory or even irreconcilable, as some authors do, is missing the singular achievement of this holy man’s life.

Seeing this life as one whole, as Steltenkamp does, makes visible the synthesis of cultural and religious beliefs and practices that at first sight—the sight of a Euro-American—seem irreconcilable: being religious in a traditional Lakota and a traditional Catholic way. Steltenkamp describes a fine example for the confluence of different symbols rooted in both Lakota and Catholic traditions: Black Elk’s interpretation of the Two Roads. In this central piece of the book the author displays the productive value of his interpretive tools. Besides the published text of *Black Elk Speaks*, these are the interview records and materials published by Raymond J. DeMallie in *The Sixth Grandfather* (1984), his familiarity with the general Lakota and Catholic background, and, essential for his approach (like in his earlier book *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* [1993]), the personal testimony of Black Elk’s daughter, Lucy Looks Twice. Thus, we can see how the image of the “good red road,” often quoted