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The Sun Dance Opera

A Call for Native Survivance

Lorin Groesbeck

In his 1994 book, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor coined the term “survivance” (1). A portmanteau of “survival” and “resistance,” this term reflects a shift in study of Native American culture. Rather than measuring the homogenizing effects of white colonialism, survivance suggests that Native culture is far more than a reaction and submission to physical and cultural domination (Vizenor 1). Rather, there is a subversive element in Native cultural output that supersedes white infringement. Instead of being victimized, Native authors demonstrate pride in their heritage and a refusal to assimilate through language, art, religious experience, and so on to white expectations. Survivance suggests an active effort by Native Americans to reclaim their various cultures and determine the direction of their futures.

Thus far, critics such as Vizenor and literary scholar Alan Velie have focused primarily on how contemporary Native literature expresses this attitude of survivance through disputation of the image of the hyperreal Indian while also highlighting the importance of traditional trickster narratives. However, there has been a lack of recognition and study of earlier literature and other works of art as forms of survivance, leaving a sizable portion of active Native voices unheard. For example, eighty years before Vizenor introduced the term survivance, Zitkala-Ša (Yankton Sioux) collaborated with Brigham Young University professor William F. Hanson in

1913 to compose the first Native American opera, *The Sun Dance Opera*, a dramatic depiction of Sioux life and the then-outlawed religious Sun Dance. Studying Zitkala-Ša's work reveals early expressions of survivance through her use of Sioux-specific music, language, regalia, and Native American performers, and the traditional trickster figure, while also reflecting the works of other artists engaging with similar themes in a variety of mediums. This paper argues that *The Sun Dance Opera* won its awards and achieved its success because its use of these elements portrays survivance in ways otherwise impossible in literature. As such, the scope and relevance of survivance expands to include a broader array of voices and experiences throughout time that otherwise go unnoticed by literary scholars.

The current conversation surrounding survivance revolves around a few prevalent ideas found in Native literature, namely counteracting the hyperreal Indian and emphasizing the importance of trickster narratives. Vizenor writes about the poststructuralist theory of simulation and how Native Americans are typically caricatured as one-dimensional stoic and feathered braves rather than multifaceted individuals and communities that grow and evolve with the world's cultural trends. His dubbed "postindian" serves as the counterpart to the hyperreal Indian painted by white culture and stands as a symbol of presence and life as opposed to the mythic and dead. Alan Velie and other scholars, have further studied this concept within the framework of the "heyoka" or trickster figure, a common literary trope used to subvert stereotypical representations of Native Americans. Quick and resourceful, these ironic and witty characters provide a voice and body for retaliation against white oppressors. The trickster acts as a rebellious figure—amoral, possessing strong appetites, footloose, and callous, yet also sympathetic (Velie 122). He acts as a point of access for audiences, a means by which to better understand stereotypical Native American characters before subsequently subverting them in a refreshing manner that illustrates the characters in a new light. While Zitkala-Ša employs both the postindian and heyoka in her opera, she builds on these ideas by using her own experiences and skills as a musician to undermine images of the hyperreal Indian. Consequently, her unmatched work reached audiences that literature could not, and it would go on to be named opera of the year by the New York Opera Guild in 1938 (Hafen 103). By presenting her work as an opera, Zitkala-Ša utilizes her unique skill set to boldly claim authority and artistic

control over the portrayal of her people in such a way that is neither passive nor reactionary but rather proud and resistant to cultural assimilation.

While opera, the supposed highest form of art, was traditionally a white sphere, Zitkala-Ša embraces the medium to assert her own cultural dominance. Taos Pueblo scholar P. Jane Hafen argues choosing to develop the story in the context of an opera gives the work a sense of credibility to white audiences, forcing them to look beyond racial stereotypes and to consider Indian people for their own value (105). In operatic form, *The Sun Dance Opera* appeals to audiences who may have typically overlooked the work of a Native artist. Instead, it gained enough steam to move from performances in Vernal, Utah, to Provo and Salt Lake City and eventually to New York City, exposing itself to audiences of a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Having already achieved a level of recognition for her collection of short stories *American Indian Stories*, it might have seemed more logical for Zitkala-Ša to present the story of the Sun Dance through literature. However, by putting it in the context of an opera, she claims space for a Native presence in high culture while demonstrating her viability as a musician as well as Native American cultures in general. *The Sun Dance Opera's* very existence actively resists cultural stereotypes and societal expectations of Native Americans, marking it as a work of survivance.

By elevating her work to the sphere of high art, Zitkala-Ša also lifts herself out of Native American stereotypes alongside *The Sun Dance Opera*. White audiences were accustomed to seeing "Show Indians" in the immensely popular Wild West shows of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries (Hafen 105). Zitkala-Ša could also be classified as a "Show Indian," having won awards in public speaking and trained in classical European-style violin. However, Hafen argues that "rather than continuing as trained Indian on exhibit, she may have been trying to assume artistic control with composition and direction of the opera and to present her own cultural viewpoint. The performance of the opera allowed her personal and cultural validation" (105). By taking artistic control, Zitkala-Ša's opera effectively pushes against expectations of how "civilized" Indians should act. The opera facilitated the means by which she could demonstrate resistance against the hyperreal image of Native Americans that white culture expected. Far from being reactionary, Zitkala-Ša uses the opera to withstand and rise above any sense of passive victimry.

In addition to its position as a piece of high art, the opera as an act of survivance is immediately apparent through the cast's actual performance of

the Sun Dance. The federal government had long since banned the religious dance as an act of rebellion and would continue to do so in the United States until the 1930s. The opera centers on the Sun Dance and its importance for the two lovers, Winona and Ohiya, who can only wed if Ohiya survives and conquers the grueling five-day ritual. As he and the other braves perform the dance, they demonstrate not only the strength, perseverance, and deliberateness required to win the approval of the Indian maiden's father but also the qualities needed by Native people to resist governmental pressure and a stifling dominant culture. Completing the dance brings honor and pride, something that white America failed to recognize in Native American communities. This intense display of physical prowess represented another psychological blow against assimilation and the victimization of Native people. However, the powerful effects of the performance of the Sun Dance would not be what they are were if not for its authentic demonstration on stage. A simple retelling in literature could not create the same effect as the actual performance. By opting to stage the ritual, Zitkala-Ša entreats the audience to recognize and celebrate the continuance and ubiquity of Native survivance.

Zitkala-Ša further promotes survivance through her resolution to keep the Sun Dance in the Sioux language. She and Hanson had previously observed Ute tribes performing the dance and used members of the Ute nation to perform in the original staging of the opera. However, for Zitkala-Ša, the ritual was Sioux, the words were Sioux, and the hardships reenacted were Sioux. Insisting that the performers learn and represent her Sioux roots demonstrates her reluctance to submit to the white ideas of tribal ambiguity and demand instead to be recognized for what she is, a Sioux woman. By claiming her individual commitment to her tribe, she asserts its sovereignty as a separate entity from other Indian nations and the United States itself. In doing so, she elevates her Sioux culture and actively defies white assimilation.

Moreover, in claiming tribal sovereignty through her use of tribal customs, Zitkala-Ša does so in a manner that written word alone could not fully express. A Native author could choose to write in their native tongue without question. However, since the opera is a group effort, and as the majority of the original performers were not Sioux, it might have seemed simpler to conform to other interests. On the contrary, she uses not only the Sioux language, but also their melodies, dances, and stories. By so doing, she takes the concept of survivance a step beyond what is possible for a limited author and exercises her tribal sovereignty in all aspects of the opera, for the Sioux is, as Zitkala-Ša

states, her “first love” (Hanson 76). The very representation of her people defies the way traditional proponents of survivance expressed such in their own works. The complete visual, musical, and theatrical package heightens the reality of the active Sioux presence.

While the Sioux script necessarily determines the plot of the production, another way Zitkala-Ša furthers themes of survivance in her opera is by allowing the performers to ad-lib the chants sung throughout the work after the tradition of oral storytelling. In a time when the country sought to assimilate Native Americans through education, religion, and stamping out indigenous languages and traditions, this method stands out in stark contrast to traditional contemporaneous European stage performances. Zitkala-Ša coached the performers in the language and phraseology, but then allowed them to perform at will (Hafen 106). By allowing traditional chants to extend beyond the script and pull from individuals’ experiences, the performers demonstrated their own acts of active resistance against a homogeneous society. Again, the vital element necessary to make this act of survivance unique and relevant is the life the opera takes on stage. By creating a fluid script, Zitkala-Ša allows performers to deviate in unexpected ways. Without the songs and dances, there would not be a medium to express dissent from the stereotypical Indian tribe to the heartfelt and living individual and community.

One of the greatest examples of Sioux sovereignty in the original production of *The Sun Dance Opera* was the casting of Old Sioux, the centenarian cousin of Sitting Bull, and his impromptu performance of the outlawed Sun Dance. Zitkala-Ša and her husband had taken in this recluse after spending fifty years separated from society, and he eagerly joined their family and the production (Hanson 72). The performers respected this old Native’s knowledge of Sioux culture and experience with the sacred dances, and audiences felt similar curiosity toward this relic of what seemed a distant past. Meanwhile, Old Sioux thrived in his new position in the opera. Co-author and composer William F. Hanson records in his memoirs a certain performance in the Salt Lake Theatre where Old Sioux delivered an unplanned performance: “The unusual incident occurred in Act V, at the finale-climax of the opera. . . . an eerie guttural [sic] moaning ejaculation (molto religioso) came from back stage. This gust of emotion was not in the routine of the opera score. It was a spontaneous outburst from the heart of the real, the inner Old Sioux. He was uncontrollably excited” (Hanson 86). Old Sioux took center stage and

fervently began the sacred dance, engaging not only his fellow actors but also the audience as the cast echoed his chants. When he finally retreated from the stage, “the applause was loud and long” (Hanson 87).

This physical representation of open rebellion against white cultural oppression held even greater impact because of its live performance. Overcome with emotion, Old Sioux commanded the stage and entranced the audience, who in turn were moved by his heartfelt performance. Far from being passive or reactionary, Old Sioux actively took control of his role and performed the dance that had long been outlawed by the white government. Simply reading a description of the Sun Dance or Old Sioux’s unexpected performance pales in comparison to what people in attendance witnessed that day. Zitkala-Ša’s chosen medium allowed audiences to more fully participate and invest themselves in the Native ritual, thus becoming privy to living and evolving Native traditions and not just the hyperreal version white culture has perpetuated.

In addition to the actual performers, characters in Zitkala-Ša’s *The Sun Dance Opera* also demonstrate subversion to the larger outside society. As scholars have pointed out, trickster figures are important characteristics of stories of survivance. That remains true in the opera as well. In the story, Hebo, a friend of the male protagonist, Ohiya, continually gets the better of the Shoshone Sweet Singer, the story’s villain. Sweet Singer, an outsider who has previously taken advantage of maiden from his own tribe, enters the Sioux camp with the intent to woo the chief’s fair daughter, Winona. Hebo, however, takes it upon himself to mock and frustrate Sweet Singer to the point of anger and who then vows he will make Ohiya pay for the mockery (Hanson 144). Meanwhile, Hebo remains carefree. While acting as a form of comic relief, Hebo the trickster also plays an important role in promoting survivance. As a typically immoral and incendiary character, he highlights the human error and imperfection in those he interacts with. Engaging in a humorous way, he also invites audiences to band against the antagonist and those who typically seek to harm the Native American people in general. He makes fools out of them, demonstrating the tribe’s power over their enemies. In this sense, Hebo mocks those who seek to impose on the Sioux as they begin their sacred dance ceremony. Implied in this action is the Native American response to a government and white culture that repeatedly tries and—as demonstrated here—fails to overrun and destroy Native sovereignty and viability.

As important and pervasive as trickster figures are in Native literature, Hebo’s role is especially relevant and necessary in this musical drama. As

he prepares to harass Sweet Singer, he sings a song informing audiences of his character:

My name? My name is Hebo.
 Your yes, my contrary no.
 Your tears Laugh I away
 I turn dull toil into play.

He continues:

So contrary am I
 'Tho scalped I could not die.
 When you ask me to eat with you
 I turn, and bid you adieu. (141)

From his introduction, audiences know what to expect from the mischievous heyoka. Like any jester or fool found in European productions, he uses clever word play to get the better of enemies. These tricky lines are further enhanced by adding music, dance, staging, and so on. The delivery is what gains sympathy for and trust in this conniving yet useful figure of chaos. His influence diminishes when left to written word. Without the additional elements of music and spoken script, Hebo loses his overall effect. Conversely, with those extra elements, Hebo becomes a force of survivance.

As demonstrated by the trickster figure Hebo, the music, libretto, staging, and dances combine to give Zitkala-Ša's *The Sun Dance Opera* all the more power and impact for audiences. From its characters and storyline to the circumstances under which it was composed and performed, it emanates themes of survivance, the active Native American presence over victimization by dominant culture. The opera helps to overcome the image of the hyperreal Indian by allowing individual experiences—from Old Sioux's impromptu performance to the cast's ad-libbed chants—to determine the course of the narrative. However, *The Sun Dance Opera* is only a case study of how one particular artist has incorporated elements of survivance into her work. By looking beyond the limits of literature, scholars find evidence that Native American artists of all kinds and backgrounds have long engaged in acts of survival and resistance. Through more intensive study, archives of survivance will expand to include a greater array of experiences. As they grow, they can only help to build and empower Native voices that have long spoken but have previously gone unheard.

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