

A Study of Native American Resistance Rhetoric against Environmental Injustice

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Abstract: This article explores how Native Americans or indigenous groups exploit different rhetoric to resist the environmental injustice and social exclusion imposed by neoliberalism. It aims to find out what kinds of resistance rhetoric the Native American environmental justice activists use, why they resist neoliberal advocacy of environmental justice, and how their resistance is reflected in the chosen text. Using “environmental justice discourse” within Ecocritical perspective, specifically based on Chishandra Taylor’s and Stella M. Capek’s views on resistance rhetoric, it analyses Gerald Vizenor’s *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (2008). This text reflects the indigenous people’s struggle against environmental hazards and social exclusion of the Native Americans caused by the neoliberal economic system of the US government. This study falls under the paradigm of hermeneutic research that exploits interpretive and argumentative modes. It uses the selected texts as primary and different scholars’ opinions expressed in scholarly journals as secondary data. Its finding suggests that the indigenous people, by resisting different forms of colonialism and imperialism, have contributed to environmental justice, the harmonic relationship between the biotic and abiotic world, and the welfare of entire species on earth. By introducing a fresh interpretive tool within academia, this study contributes to scholarly pursuits.

Keywords: Environmental Justice, Native American, Neoliberal Advocacy, Resistance

Introduction

This paper explores and analyses how Native Americans and marginalized groups exploit specific rhetoric to resist environmental injustice and social exclusion. Using an Ecocritical perspective, it analyses *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (2008) edited by Gerald Vizenor. Using the

insights specifically that of Chrishandra Taylor's and Stella M. Capek's views on resistance rhetoric it analyses Vizenor's text that executes a critique of neoliberalism and cultural imperialism.

The residents living in highly polluted areas, mainly the Native American environmental justice activists from minority communities, advocate environmental justice through different strategies like 'ethos,' 'pathos' and 'kairos' to counter-hegemonic power. Based on their dedication to conserving nature and their untiring struggle to restore their traditional right to the soil, this study argues that these people have tirelessly contributed since millennium to environmental justice. They have fought against oppression, social exclusion and injustice imposed by hegemonic powers. Environmental justice, as a discourse, cannot be complete by excluding their roles. These people consider that social or environmental problems are the result of social inequality and discrimination based on race, class or gender. The social hierarchy, as they suppose, results because of neoliberal economic system under democracy. They believe that the neoliberal policies provide enough space for private sectors, corporate houses and multinational companies to earn profits without any interruption. In this context, this study asserts that the Native people are the ones who, with their traditional knowledge and experience, have selflessly worked for a tuneful link with nature. The Indigenous calls for environmental justice are not only for distributional equity but for keeping their community culture intact and letting them continue to reproduce their traditional practices and cosmologies to perpetuate an age-long relationship with nature that binds these Native people with their ancestral soil.

The mainstream environmental activists stress resolving environmental problems without addressing socio-political factors. Their focus is on saving wilderness, wildlife, and a pristine natural environment. Their goal is to reconnect man with nature (Oricha et al. 2). However, they are indifferent towards the social and health-related problems faced by the minority communities. On the other hand, the Native Americans are struggling for their survival, the continuity of their traditions, and their ownership of the soil. Minority communities and people of color are more likely to experience instances of environmental discrimination when it comes to disposing of waste materials

and nuclear waste. This study explores how the advocates of environmental justice apply resistance rhetoric against all sorts of imperialism.

This study falls under hermeneutic research which employs interpretive and argumentative approaches. It uses the selected texts as primary data and different scholars' opinions expressed in scholarly journals are used as secondary data. It uses "environmental justice discourse" within the Ecocritical perspective as the interpretive tool. It analyses the representative texts based on Chrishandra Taylor's and Stella M. Capek's views on resistance rhetoric and Dorceta Taylor's social construction of environmental problems.

Geral Vizenor's *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* has got a number of scholars' attention. They have interpreted these texts differently. After reading *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* Navarre Scott Momaday mentions in his essay, "The Man Made of Words" (1997) how the Natives understand themselves. "We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and that we are" (30). Momaday understands the Native people's imagination as strength. Malea Powell finds that the Native writings lack a conscious rhetoric. She adds that the autobiographies of most indigenous writers are expressions of indigenous cultures in which the writers simply present particular objective reality that are rarely seen as consciously rhetorical (406). It is true that their writings are not equipped with conscious rhetoric, but still, they contain rich contents and their dedication to preserve their rights by preserving the soil.

George Steiner stresses on the need of preserving indigenous language for the preservation of environment and culture. He states ahead that each human culture, belief and language maps the world differently (xiv). He narrates that these "geographies of remembrance" (xiv) are connected to survivance struggle. Dell Hymes has talked about the need for linguistic interpretation of Native poetics of life. He argues that the heritage of American Indian poetry must be re-analysed and re-evaluated (36). Hymes seems to have felt the necessity of studying aborigine culture but his focus is on linguistic level alone. He does not talk about the Native people's role in preserving the entire

ecosystem. Scholars and critics of indigenous culture have focused their attention on Native people's marginalization, exploitation of natural resources from their ancestral land. However, the issue of how these minoritized groups' resistance rhetoric against different forms of injustice are yet to be explored. As there are very few significant integrated studies made on resistance rhetoric, this study fills this gap by paying adequate attention to the ways Native Americans and the marginalized groups use specific rhetoric to resist environmental injustice and social exclusion by unmasking the practical implication of neoliberal use of deceptive rhetoric.

Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence describes that the Native people have struggled not only to survive but also to resist the colonial expansion and cultural imperialism under the face of neoliberalism. It depicts a strong sense of Native presence. The history of indigenous people has a pitiable story. Theirs is the story of harassment, enslavement, violence and erasure. Christopher Columbus, who discovered America for the first time, depicts the indigenous people of North America as ignorant creatures. He describes thus:

They appeared to me to be very poor people in all respects. They go completely naked, as the day they were born, even the women. All of whom I saw were young, not above thirty years of age, well made, with fine shapes and faces; their hair short, and coarse like that of a horse's tail... I showed them swords which they grasped by the blades, and cut themselves through ignorance. (Dunn et al. 67-69)

These lines express colonial authors' mindsets towards the Native people who were wild in the eyes of civilized explorers like Christopher. The colonial authors describe the history of the indigenous people as one in which the Native people are still in a barbarous state and commit acts of violence. The indigenous women are treated as commodities there. The picture below, portrays their wickedness and the state of barbarism.

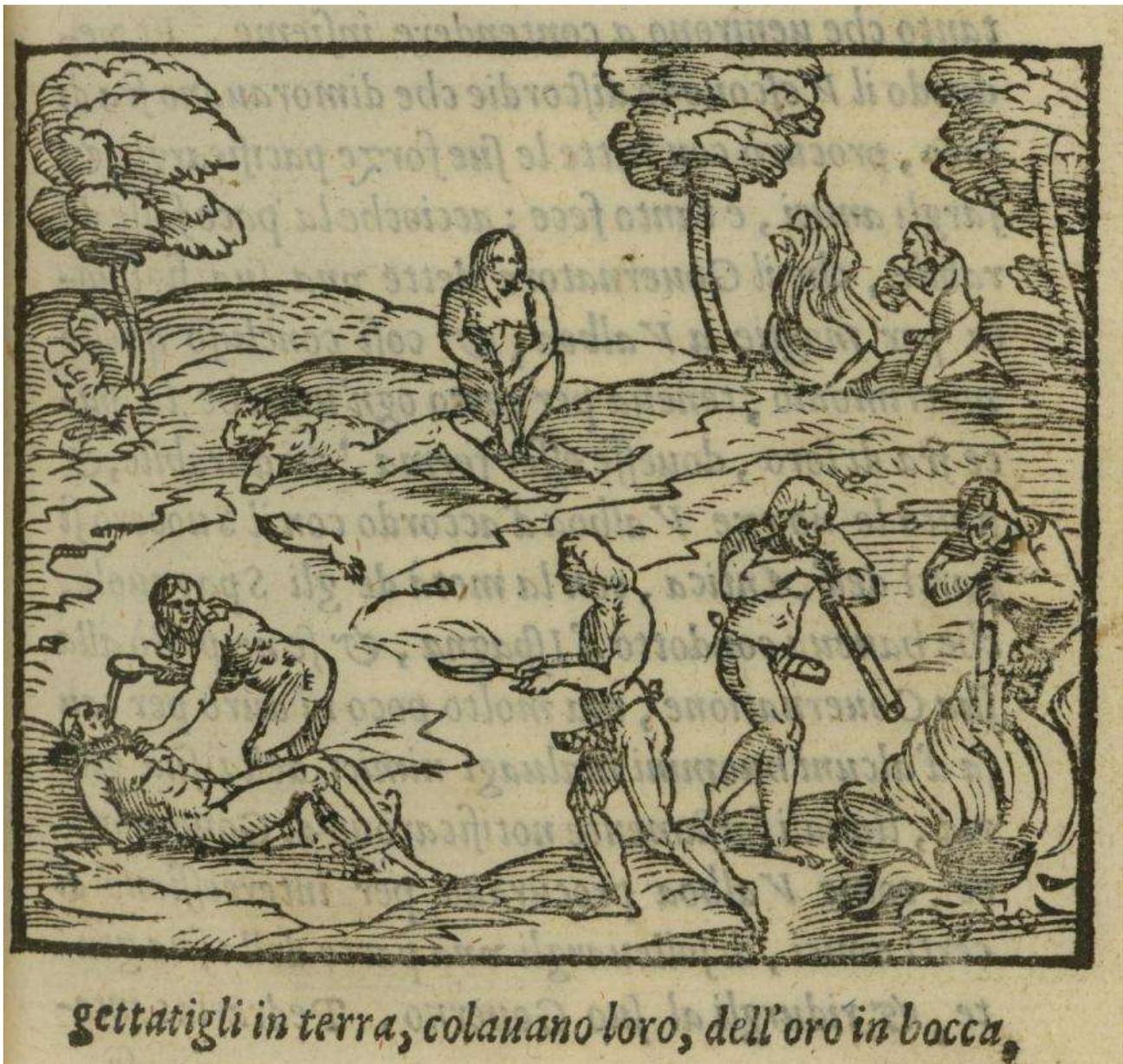


Figure 1 (Image sourced from John Carter Brown library)

In such state of colonial look towards the Native people, Vizenor's *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* sketches the Native people's struggle for survival as resistance for establishing their identity. The Native people resist all rhetorical tropes that describe them as subordinate. Defying the negative tropes, Vizenor uses the term 'survivance' as a rhetorical tool to resist and mark the Native presence. He explains it not merely as a reaction, or a survival story but as an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victim (Vizenor vii). Vizenor's view of survivance came against the genocidal attacks of the

Native Americans. Karl Kroeber, in this context, claims that Vizenor's work aims to repair a peculiarly vicious consequence of genocidal attacks on natives of the Americas: an inducing in them of their destroyer's view that they are mere survivors (25). The Native Americans have always been the victim of genocidal attacks. These attacks are not the stories of the past, but they are still going on. The Native Nations claim to have special rights to the land they have been living on for centuries, but they have not been able to hold ownership of their lands due to interferences from different quarters. They are the subjects of the US domination. The Native people have been oppressed by the dominant groups just because of their illiteracy, and inability to express even their pressing demands. Vizenor terms these oppressive attitudes the “Manifest Manners” and defines them as “the course of dominance, the racialist notions and misnomers sustained in archives and lexicons as 'authentic' representations of Indian cultures” (vii). They are the representations and strategies of dominance over Native people.

The Native Americans have either participated in or mobilized different movements against environmental injustices. These economically marginalized always fight against environmental discrimination based on race, class and gender using different rhetorical tools. Chrishandra Taylor describes:

Minority residents living in highly polluted areas use the strategy of *kairos*, the appeals of *ethos* and *pathos* to reframe environmental discourse. Through *kairotic* moments, activists critically interrupt discourses which privilege inaction over community protests. They use ethical appeals to tie activism and political discourse into scientific and technical communication. Lastly, they use emotional appeals and image events to persuade audiences to recognize the injustice of environmental discrimination. (slide 6-8)

The minority communities deploy “environmental justice” as a tool to establish their right to their ancestral land. They frame and interpret the word ‘justice’ communicate the environmental burden to claim their recognition by using *ethos*, *pathos* and *Kairos*.

Grass-roots level groups generally have less access to political, legal, and scientific resources than do their opponents (Capek 7). When they claim their democratic rights, they often find themselves stigmatized for raising such issues. Their opponents, usually organized around groups such as the chamber of commerce, accuse anti-toxic activists as selfish NIMBY—Not in My Backyard (Capek 8). They are often characterized as hysterical and irrational or as greedy publicity-seekers. Exasperated by humiliating behaviours, as Capek further describes, the antitoxic activists gradually discover that there is no “polite” way to get their problems addressed (8). Their language rhetoric is therefore direct and it expresses their anger and inner dissatisfaction against the polluters. They protest the White elitists’ oppressive attitude using their own rhetorical strategies. They often use “ethos, pathos and kairos” as key rhetoric. Vizenor records different events that the Native people deploy to resist interferences. Among so many of such rhetoric, the use of ‘memory’ is one. Vizenor mentions a situation when a Native farmer vehemently opposed the court’s verdict when he was denied his claim to regulate manoomin rice plant as an age-long prerogative the Natives obtained. The Justice Lord had supported the earlier verdict made by the district Judge who had denied the Native farmer’s claim. The farmer had presented the name of John Squirrel, a dead man who had witnessed the government agent accepting the Native people’s prerogative to the land and crops, as evidence.

“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?” (Vizenor 2-3)

Aubid’s expression of anger over the court’s decision to deny indigenous rights displays a severe objection to the imposing law that tries to weaken their rights. It is an appeal of both ‘ethos’ and ‘pathos’. Aubid’s resistance forces the court to think over the ethical side of whether forcing local farmers from producing their traditional rice plant is ethical. At the same time, their compelling stories

collect the judges' sympathy over their situation. They present their memories of the past about their millennial right to preserve their land, practices, traditions and wisdom. Though these oral narratives and memories are not the reliable evidences to secure their right to the soil, the minority people present these stuffs as their evidence. These are the 'pathos'—appeals of emotions.

Standing against the patent politics of India, Vandana Shiva stresses farmers' agricultural rights in the lines below:

Farmers' rights are an ecological, economic, cultural and political imperative. Without community rights, agricultural communities cannot protect agricultural biodiversity. This biodiversity is necessary not just for the ecological insurance of agriculture. Right to agricultural biodiversity is also an economic imperative because without it our farmers and our country will lose their freedom and options for survival. (85)

The Native farmers' resistance to the law inscribed by the Whites is both related to their survival and to the preservation of nature and biodiversity. Their stories are intuitive; their visual memories reflect a Native sense of presence and sources of evidence and survivance. Their Native names of different objects, animals, birds and entire phenomena are based on collective memories. They reflect the cultural absence and tragic victimry of Native American Indians in the United States.

Vizenor mentions another event of the use of 'pathos.' He recounts a moment when a Native humanist was captured and kept in a museum as the last Stone Ager. He was given a new name Ishi realizing a popular name would save him from telling his real name to the strangers. He was not a wild man like they described. He was a visionary, not a separatist, and his oral stories were assertions of liberty (5). The Natives carried out a policy of mockery and irony against the federal agents to understand the caged humanist. Humour and mockery are also forms of 'pathos.' The mockery of federal agents has always been a native theme in stories.

Minorities also use 'kairos', a rhetorical appeal of timeliness and opportunity. Literally it refers to the appropriateness of doing something for its effective applicability. It captures an appropriate situation for accomplishing a job. James Kinneavy and Catherine R. Ruskin define it as

timeliness, appropriateness, decorum, symmetry, balance-awareness of the rhetorical situation or “the circumstances that open moments of opportunity (131-142). Kairos takes advantage of a perfect moment of delivering a message. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech can be taken as an example of having kairotic effect as it had perfectly captured the moment to persuade people to support the civil rights movement which inspired the generations to understand the power of a non-violent revolution. Similarly, the environmental justice activists have always seized the perfect time to hit the polluters when their settlements suffered from the unidentified diseases. The US activists’ community based antitoxic protests in 1980s can be taken as example. The Native tribes are characterized as tribes with a wandering tradition. The Native people are always on the move and have always been defined fluidly. They are supposed to be unstatic. But Louis Owens (qtd. in Vizenor, *Survivance*, 221) in his *Dark River* (1999) explains the moving culture as a methodology of Native survivance and resistance (126). Their ability to adapt to a new space is tactical. Michel de Certeau regards that these people are able to disguise or transform themselves in order to survive. They can seize the moment and act accordingly. This is an example of ‘kairos’. The tactical mobility of the community conveys a message that it is strategic moves to resist and show their presence.

The Anishinaabegs, the tribal groups of North America, exploit metaphorical rhetoric to resist domination. The creation of animals and birds in their literature reveals a practice of survivance. They take help of verbal irony in their syntax and ambiguous situations of meaning to denote absence and presence. As the first Anishinaabeg historian William Warren notices that the Anishinaabeg 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” (34). The sand hill crane, a dancer bird with a red forehead and a distinctive wing beat loves to soar among the clouds, and its cry can be heard when flying above, beyond the orbit. Warren claimed that the Native Anishinaabegs are like the crane with totemic vision demonstrating the close relationship between humans, animals and the environment. The Anishinaabegs show their presence by such stories of birds and animals in their narratives. They use different metaphors to signal their opposition against the European invaders. An Anishinaabeg

member presents his vehement countering against the invaders thus, “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 Keeshkemun. 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” (Vizenor 12).

Vizenor signals the genocidal attack over the aborigine people in the lines given above. Now the survivors are opposing metaphorically. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson assert that the metaphors are the important tools for trying to comprehend feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness (193). These metaphors create a sense of presence which is the very character and practice of survivance. Anishinaabeg member makes use of ‘ethos’ to establish credibility and trust on him and to engage with his argument.

The Natives create a sense of presence by cultural reasoning. The critical interpretation of Native figuration is a theory of irony and survivance (Vizenor 13). Navarre Scott Momaday, for instance, introduces a landscape of bears and eagles in his writings. He points out that the names of animals, birds, objects, forms, features, and sounds have one definition in the eye, another in the hand. They are old and original in the mind, like the beat of rain on the river (3). The creation of such animals, bird and landscapes registers the Native presence and resistance.

The authors of literary texts from marginal communities sometimes seem to resist the dominant groups by a suicide killing too. This happens when a member finds no hope for a justifiable treatment on behalf of the authoritative power. This can be seen in Miguel Angel Austuria’s story “Iamericanos Todos!” (We are All Americans!). There, a Guatemalan tour guide Emilio Croner Jaramilo, called Milocho, is shocked by the invasion of Guatemala by foreign mercenaries in 1954 coup that displaced the democratically elected Arbenz government.

Milocho witnesses the bombing of the indigo and mestizo villages near the coast by American Airplanes. Milocho identifies himself with poor victims of his native country and particularly the indigoes who were once again being robbed of life, property, and cultural identity. As he was guiding

the American tourists from, his girlfriend Alarica Powell asked him about a volcano that destroyed the cities. His memory of the massacred Indians and his feeling of guilt for not having done anything to defend the country made him mad and he drove the bus killing all including him. (qtd. in Vizenor, *Survivance* 41) Milcho's state of mind reveals the way the oppressed class people resist the oppression by killing themselves. Miloch kills the enemy in himself (42). As far as the suicide killing is understood literally, it is cowardice to do so. A brave person faces each challenge that stands as an obstacle. However, Milcho's killing suicide should be understood figuratively. There is farsightedness in what he does. He hopes that his suicide killing would be understood as a form of resistance rather than a cowardice event. It is a resistant rhetoric against oppression.

The Native people make use of symbols as a form of resistance. Vizenor mentions how they reject all manifest manners that stereotype the Natives as wild. They deconstruct those destructive epistemologies that perpetuate trauma. They resist and subvert such embedded understanding through irony, wicked humour and language that refuses to render monologic meanings about the Natives. In an interview, Blaeser remarks that his writing is many things but "it is not a monologue," it is a dialogue in which the reader is compelled to take an active role (162). Eric Ganswoth glorifies the Native survivance through his painting "The Very Cold Moon." The last of the image accompanying the poetry of *Nickel Eclipse: Iroquois Moon* illuminates a huge moon. In its surface, there is Indian side of the early twentieth-century nickel that is cradled by antlers. The sharp points of the antlers scrape against the Indian head that is frozen emblem of vanished people.

The Natives of North America employ trickster stories as a form of resistance and survivance. The trickster is a symbolic image, a figurative trace of survivance. But it is not a tragic figure that suffers from domination or misadventure because of racial reason or monolithic tradition. It is a spirit that denies the obscure maneuvers of manifest manners. Trickster stories are still popular among Greeks to the North American aborigine. The Anishinaabeg still remember the 'Naanabozho,' a resistant figure who fights with the enemies trickily with a renewed sense of survivance. Alan Velle declares these enemies are historians, journalists, public intellectuals, and others who influence

cultural attitudes, both on the right and the left (qtd. in Vizenor, *Survivance*, 147). Vizenor objects to the way the Natives are portrayed as victims. He uses sticks to beat them back. He asks tribal people to discover their identity in their own tribal tradition. The trickster told the story as a means of defense. The framing of stories is a form of survivance and resistance as did Primo Levi who survived even under the malignant helicopter attack of Nazi Germany to write his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947).

The Natives and Their Ties with Nature

The Native people's attachment to biodiversity is so intricate that they know each species and the cycles of life. They form stories of their attachments with them. So, Native stories are the sources of survivance, the comprehension and empathy of natural reason, tragic wisdom, and the provenance of new literary studies. Vizenor writes:

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...Survivance, however 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. (9)

The presence of animals, birds, and other creatures in the Native literature is a fundamental commitment of the aborigine people to preserve nature for the sake of perpetuating harmonious relationship between biotic and non-human world.

The Indigenous people have always been the victim of neoliberalism. Neoliberal policies have brought social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental challenges for indigenous peoples in the region. Indigenous communities and movements, in response, have resisted neoliberal projects together with their struggle for seeking recognition as peoples, rights for equal participation in the policy making level, redistribution of environmental benefits or harms, and recovery of ancestral territories. At the same time, the struggles of the indigenous people are both to ensure their right to

live, continue to practice their ancestral wisdom, traditions and ways of life by preserving nature and the entire species.

On the basis of a thorough examination of *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* by Gerald Vizenor, this study has revealed that the grass-roots-level environmental activists have either participated in or created and led different movements against environmental injustice. Their networks have influenced the national economy and the state policy as well. These economically marginalized activists use different rhetorical frames for social justice and equal distribution of power. They always fight against environmental discrimination based on race, class and gender using different rhetorical tools. These tools range from oral stories to the most advanced forms of protest. They exploit 'justice' as a strategy to fight against all sorts of discriminations. The aborigine people basically exploit 'kairos' to claim the rationalities of their struggle against hegemonic power. These people's struggle against neoliberal agendas are linked to their right to survive, continue to produce and reproduce their age long wisdom, traditions, cultures and ways of life in harmonious relationship with the nature, species and the entire non-living world.

Conclusion

After a close analysis of Vizenor's text, I have claimed that the Native Americans have deep connection with the land. Their cultural life styles, practices and survivals are connected with ecological preservation. Their traditional knowledge of medicinal plants, foods, forest and animals are uniquely helpful to establish the intricate relationship between flora and fauna. Their creation stories, culture, and way of life have contributed to restore the original ecosystem. They always endeavoured to mitigate environmental problems by protecting their traditional culture. Global market economy, privatization and liberal democracy have become great obstacles to their survival and ecological preservation. This study has argued that Native Americans have severely suffered from different forms of invasions and imperialism. They have gone through hard times for their survival and for establishing their age-long right to the soil. However, they have not given hope. They have struggled a lot to resist all these invasions. They employ different rhetorical strategies like direct

actions, legal actions, and community campaigns to do so. Their struggles to continue the age-long way of life are not only related to the existence of their tribes, they also ensure a sound relationship of human beings with the nonhuman world.

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