
THE UNMISSABLE: Transmotion in Native Stories and Literature

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The presence of natural motion and transmotion is obvious in native stories, but the sense of motion is not always evident in literature. The migration of birds, traces of the seasons, shadows in the snow, and tropes of totemic animal and bird are unmissable, easy gestures of motion in stories and literature.

Yet the erudite taxonomies and literary practices of commercial literature weigh the obvious sense of natural motion, and empire names and doctrines become at times more significant than the irony and tropes of literary natural motion. The learned botanical name *cypripedium acaule*, for instance, inadvertently denatures the exquisite poetic blush of a moccasin flower in the moist shadows, and other more common names and comparative similes lessen the motion of images, such as the heavy breath of bears, the marvelous shimmer of early morning dew, twilight favors on a spider web, ravens tease of hunters in camouflage, stray shadows lean over the fence, or the perfect dive of a water ouzel in a mountain stream.

The most memorable native stories are ironic, and the scenes of natural motion are sometimes parodies. Native ceremonial clowns, cultural and communal teases are ironic because the original sources are not rubric sacraments, and never certain, and the spirit, imagination, and hearsay of the moment are never the same in the continuous imaginative recount of stories.

Likewise the printed scenes in literature are ironic by the selection of names and teaser words. The definitions of words are inconclusive, no more precise than tropes, and the connotations of words are deferred to yet another situation and literary act of writers and readers. The literary scenes and notions are shelved in libraries, and wait for readers to hear the natural motion in the books.

The means of natural motion are easily grasped in the singular tropes and gestures of innovative literature, but the pleasures of ironic motion are hardly perceived in ordinary comparative similes, such as, walks like a duck, eats like a dog, or dumb as a donkey. Comparative similes are facile, and cynical similes sideline the spontaneous imagination and tropes of natural motion.

“Overhanging clouds, echoing my words, with a pleasing sound, across the earth, everywhere, making my voice heard,” and, “the first to come, epithet among the birds, bringing the rain, crow is my name,” are ironic dream songs and tropes of natural motion by a nineteenth century native Anishinaabe (Densmore 15).

Kobayashi Issa, the generous haiku poet of eighteenth century Japan, created a poignant image about the death of his young daughter, “the world of dew, is the world of dew, and yet. . . and yet” (Issa 103-4). The imagistic scene creates a natural sense of motion, a world of dew, and at the same time a trope of memory and impermanence. The scene is elusive and in motion, not a descriptive contrast or closure.

Stephen Addiss in *The Art of Haiku* provided a rather reductive interpretation that the image “captures the moment when sincere religious understanding meets the deepest feeling of the heart.” The natural motion of that concise image of sorrow and a world of dew was not a captured scene, instead the scene continues as a visionary motion of memory (Addiss 260).

Literature is a tricky voice of the past, and customarily omniscient in style. Native stories tease a sense of presence, an ironic presence, and create an elusive consciousness that is more than the mere simulations of similitude and sincerity, or the editorial investments of culture, intrigue, adventure, and petitions of conceited reality in commercial narratives.

Native stories are not priestly liturgies. The stories of creation and the marvelous scenes of trickster transmotion and transformation are related in motion and visual memory without recitations, storyline or plot resolutions, shibboleths of character development, or the denouement of commercial literature.

Consider, for instance, the concept of transmotion and the literary perception of other words with the *trans* prefix such as transcendentalism, the spiritual sense of natural motion and cultural survivance, or notions of transpacific, transhistorical, transracial, transsexual, and the common practice of transactions. The *trans* prefix initiates a sense of action or change, a literary and unitary motion, and a wider concept of the motion in images and words.

The literary inspiration and spirited totemic portrayals of birds, animals, ocean waves, and whales are transmotion, more than mere denotation, or simile. Scenes of transmotion are not syntactical clauses or closure, not simulations, and not an outline of absence, of want or scarcity of motion and presence.

The stories of native survivance are instances of natural motion, and transmotion, a visionary resistance to cultural dominance, the practices of monotheism, policies of federal reservations, and the heavy loads of industrial conversions. Regrettably commercial literature about natives has often been structured with the familiar themes of classical, heroic tragedy, and modern victimry, but scarcely classical irony or comedy. Native stories, however, are imagined and related with a sense of natural motion and survivance, not cultural denouement and victimry. The publishers of the most saleable themes of romantic victimry have obligated many native storiers and writers to convert a native sense of survivance to absence and victimry, including the popular *Black Elk Speaks* by John Neihardt, and unfortunately *The Surrounded* by D'Arcy McNickle.

The discussion of transmotion, a spirited and visionary sense of natural motion, has evolved in my critical studies as an original aesthetic theory to interpret and compare the modes, distinctions, situations, and the traces of motion in sacred objects, stories, art, and literature.

Native literary artists, those who pose in the emotive shadows of natural motion and totemic cultures, are clearly obligated, in my view, to create innovative narratives and poetic scenes that tease and reveal the fusions of native ethos, transmotion, and stories of survivance. Commercial editorial dominance, and crave of cultural victimry, must be outwitted, ridiculed, and controverted in the chance and future of native stories and innovative literature.

Native transmotion is directly related to the ordinary practices of survivance, a visionary resistance and sense of natural motion over separatism, literary denouement, and cultural victimry. Survivance and transmotion are original critical philosophies and ethical convictions derived from personal experiences of ceremonies, critical examination of sacred objects in museums, and relative observations of natural motion and totemic associations in native art, stories, and literature.

Leslie Silko encircles the reader with mythic witches, ironic creation stories, and a sense of natural motion in her novel *Ceremony*. "That is the trickery of the witchcraft," said the old man. "They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. They will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs.

We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place” (Silko 132-3).

The witches contrived a customary binary structure of race, a mythic colorant of cultural separation. The literary witchery is ironic, of course, a lively trace of transmotion in a contemporary novel.

Toni Jensen creates a sense of transmotion and native survivance in “At the Powwow Hotel,” a short story published in *From the Hill*. The story starts with the natural motion and visionary presence of corn. “When the cornfield arrived, I was standing in our hotel’s kitchen, starting Lester’s birthday cake. It was raining outside, foggy too, for the sixth day in a row, and there was flour all over my blue jeans. . . . We live in West Texas on a three-hundred-acre cotton farm at the edge of Blanco Canyon. We own the Blanco Canyon Hotel, all twelve rooms, though everybody in town calls it the Powwow Hotel on account of Lester and me being Indian” (Jensen 55-7).

Other natives arrived at the Powwow Hotel that day and the conversations continued with gestures to the miraculous arrival of corn, a field of corn. The Navajos “talked about why the corn had skipped them, had set its course east of their tribes.”

“But tonight,” the narrator declares, “there was the sound of feet, moving counterclockwise, the smell of coffee and bread and the raw, greenness of the field. And tonight, there were my legs, still at first, but surprising me by doing anything at all, and then there I was, part of it, moving.” Jensen creates marvelous scenes of natural motion, corn, greenery, and cultural survivance. The arrival of the corn is a crucial and memorable scene of totemic and visionary transmotion at the Powwow Hotel (Jensen 67).

“I have no state but my visionary portrayals in art, no native nation but a sensual, totemic landscape of memories, and the unreserved resistance of dominance and nostalgia,” declared Dogroy Beaulieu, the native artist and narrator of my recent novel *Shrouds of White Earth*. “Does anyone ever experience a native state, a secure place of stories, solace, and sentiments that never torment the heart and memories? Yes, of course, my friend, you create marvelous literary scenes and stories of the reservation, and yet your characters are always in flight from the mundane notions of reality. You write stories not to escape, but to evade the tiresome politics of native victimry.

“I create traces of totemic creatures, paint visionary characters in magical flight, native scenes in the bright colors of survivance, and you create the same scenes by the tease of words and irony” (Vizenor, *Shrouds* 3; 5-6). Dogroy relates that the name Beaulieu, his surname, is a visionary place, and an actual township on the White Earth Reservation. He creates shrouds of animals and birds, the traces and shadows of natural motion.

“The books have voices. I hear them in the library,” writes Diane Glancy in the first scene of native poetic motion in *Designs of the Night Sky*. “I know the voices are from the books. Yet I know the old stories do not like books. . . . I hear the books. Not with my ears, but in my imagination. Maybe the voices camp in the library because the written words hold them there. Maybe they are captives with no place to go” (Glancy 5).

N. Scott Momaday, the novelist, points out in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* that his grandmother “lived out her long life in the shadow of Rainy Mountain, the immense landscape of the continental interior lay like memory in her blood.” Aho, his grandmother, told stories about the great native migration, a visual journey that continued for some five hundred years. “I wanted to see in reality what she had seem more perfectly in the mind’s eye” (Momaday 7).¹ The stories of that memorable native migration are inadvertent sources of the theory of transmotion, or visionary motion, clearly a trace and presence of native continental liberty.

Yes, transmotion, the presence of visionary narrative voices and stories are overheard at universities, libraries, in the book, and with the same sense of natural motion in nature. Many readers are creative, truly inspired by literary scenes, and enriched by a sense of presence with native voices on great migrations, and the visionary motion of birds and animals. The most memorable stories are in natural motion, but not, of course, with the literary construction of denouement and victimry, or the commercial guidance that writers must turn visionary scenes and natural motion into mere descriptive characters with ideologies and wearisome representations of motivation and development. Native trickster stories start with motion, visionary transmotion, but not the closure of descriptive nominations.

Trickster was going along, and the listener or reader can easily sense and imagine the motion and the visionary transmotion of the story. Some listeners and readers have lost the capacity to appreciate the transmutations of time, gender, water, myths, ironic scenes, and the many mutations of trickster figures by gesture, word, imagination, and tricky maneuvers. These trickster gestures create a sense of visionary motion. The stories of native creation and trickster

scenes were seldom told in the same way, and visionary characters must elude simulations, description, causation, denouement, and cultural victimry. These commercial nominations, along with facile comparative similes, would never inspire or provide a native sense of visionary presence and survivance.

"Call me Ishmael," an ironic biblical name, and the first sentence of the novel *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville, is one of many first person voices that are overheard in libraries, trickster stories, and in literary adventures. Melville creates a truly memorable sailor of natural motion and spectacular survivance, and pursues the ironic visionary and moral transcendence of a crippled sea warrior and transmotion of a mighty white whale.

Ishmael is an everlasting trope and trouble of natural motion and transcendence, and the very tease of reality and mortality. "But this deepest fear is not death; he fears that there is nothing beyond our shell of existence; there is no ideal reality beyond the material; there is nothing," observed John Bryant in "*Moby-Dick* as Revolution." Nothingness is a paradox, of course, but nothingness is a "universal constant with no higher reality" (Bryant 73).

Herman Melville is a master of the tropes of motion, and he creates an essential sense of visionary motion, or transmotion in almost every scene of *Moby-Dick*, but his mastery and perceptions of natural motion are more direct and descriptive in the chapter "The Tail." He is noticeably more representative than visionary, and describes five specific motions of the tail. The fifth motion is "the ordinary floating posture" (Melville 373).

Melville's descriptions of the motions of the tail are knowing and necessary, and yet he declares, "The more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it. At times there are gestures in it, which, though they would well grace the hand of many, remain wholly inexplicable." The motion of the tails may be "mystical gestures." He concludes the chapter with references to signs and symbols, an ironic conversation "with the world" (374). The cetology and whale tail discourse in this chapter mimic the creative transmotion or the visionary scenes of motion in the novel *Moby-Dick*.

Ishmael related in the first scene of *Moby-Dick* that when he was sidetracked on a dreary day he paused at "coffin warehouses" and then "quietly took to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this," and "almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me" (3).

That portrayal of sentiments of the ocean is an obvious invitation to stories of natural motion, and no matter the tease or chance of a whaler, the crease, thrust, and surge of waves, the natural motion of the sea always provides a sublime transcendence of sorrow, cultural closure, and victimry.

“So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world,” Ishmael declared, “that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical or otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at *Moby Dick* as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more deplorable, a hideous and intolerable allegory” (204-5).

The reference to an “intolerable allegory” is a literary gesture that respects the natural motion of the great whale, and not the mere parable or moral stories that reveal an obscure and covert sense of absence and literary closure. *Moby Dick* is a trope of transmotion, and the menace of the mighty white whale outmaneuvers the similes of literary whalers and the missionaries of enlightenment.

Natural motion and transmotion are portrayed in the scenes of the ocean, and sailors in search of whales. *Moby Dick*, the great white whale, however, is an obscure presence in the novel, and the outcome is not an unbearable or mere nihilistic allegory of vengeance or victimry.

Natural motion is a heartbeat, ravens on the wing, the rise of thunderclouds and the mysterious weight of whales. Transmotion is the visionary or creative perceptions of the seasons and the visual scenes of motion in art and literature. The literary portrayal and tropes of transmotion are actual and visual images across, beyond, on the other side, or in another place, and with an ironic and visionary sense of presence. The portrayal of motion is not a simulation of absence, but rather a creative literary image of motion and presence.

Ishmael related that he would paint “without a canvas something like the true form of the whale,” and announced that it was time to prove that some pictures of whales were wrong. It may be that the primal source of all those pictorial delusions will be found among the oldest” sculptures of the Hindus, Egyptians, and Grecians (261-2).

“The French are the lads for painting action,” Ishmael declared, and the “natural aptitude of the French for seizing the picturesqueness of things seems to be particularly evinced in what paintings and engravings they have of their whaling scenes. With not one tenth of England’s experience in the fishery, and not the thousandths part of that of the Americans, they have

nevertheless furnished both nations with the only finished sketches at all capable of conveying the real spirit of the whale hunt.”

The French portrayed scenes of whales with a visionary sense that conveyed transmotion and the surge of the ocean. The “English and American whale draughtsmen seem entirely content with presenting the mechanical outline of things, such as the vacant profile of the whale; which, so far as picturesqueness of effect is concerned, is about tantamount to sketching the profile of a pyramid” (268).

The portrayals of whales that Ishmael so admired were in natural motion, a visionary image that transcended the closure of a “mechanical outline” and created a sense of the presence of whales. He favored the painterly show of transmotion, the surge of the ocean, and likewise revealed the same sense of motion in narratives.

Moby Dick, the great white whale, is a spectacular portrayal of literary transmotion, a spirited and mysterious image of natural motion in the ocean, in the book, and in the imagination of the reader.

“One often hears of writers that rise and swell with their subject,” declared Ishmael. “How then, with me, writing of this Leviathan?” The “mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs” (Melville 447-448).

Rightly so, the great portrayals of whales are in natural motion, the transmotion and “panoramas” of the universe. Likewise the notable diction of the narrator and his astute manner and maneuvers of words created images of the natural motion of science, ideologies, and history. Ishmael created a figurative sweep of humans and whales, and a distinct sense of motion in a narrative of irony and chance.

Moby-Dick is a “mediation on democracy” declared Stephen Zelnick in “*Moby-Dick: The Republic at Sea*.” Consider the scenes of equality in the novel, “the exalted imagery of common workmen. . . .” Ishmael “tells us more about the embattled American experience in liberty and democracy than most have chosen to recognize” (Zelnick 691; 703).

Melville created contentious characters in natural motion, and the scenes of visionary transmotion, political ideologies, moral transcendence, and vengeance were carried out in the spectacular pursuit of the mysterious white whale.

John Bryant asserted in “*Moby-Dick* as Revolution” that the novel “depicts the struggle to understand the relation between the promise of transcendental thought and its abnegating opposite, the fear of nothingness.” *Moby-Dick*, “at first glance. . . seems a revolution almost exclusively in its aesthetic modernity. The long, rhythmic lines, the prose poetry, the mixture of genres and multiplicity of voices, the experiments in point of view, symbolism, and psychology,” however, the “novel’s radical politics seem strangely submerged. Surely, we can extract from the novel’s veil of allegory a prophetic warning that the American ship of state is heading toward the disaster of Civil War” (70).

The narrative structure, chase of whales, luminous waves, and figurative portrayals of the ocean, create a literary sense of natural motion. “Ishmael knows the transcendental problem. He begins in crisis, seeing death,” but “his deepest fear is not death; he fears that there is nothing beyond our shell of existence” and the absence of a reality. “Ishmael takes to sea democratically to confront his fear of nothingness, just as Ahab takes to seas autocratically to kill that fear in the form of the white whale” (Bryant 72).

The Whale by Herman Melville was first published in London in 1851, and later in the same year *Moby-Dick* was published in New York. Melville, once a neglected author, was not widely recognized or celebrated as a literary artist until the end of the First World War. The secure cultural representations of the enlightenment were in ruins at the time, and the breakdown of rational structures and institutions turned many young survivors into extremists, creative storiers, and innovative artists. *Moby-Dick* was discovered in the context of the ruins of empires, rational governance, and the rise of modern abstract art at the end of the First World War.

Melville created a wild whaler, and a direct, expressive narrator of survivance. Ishmael was a sailor portrayed in natural motion, a storier of great ocean waves and exotic scenes of liberty. Ishmael was a sailor of resistance, inspired by chance and transcendence, and he became the sole survivor and storier of the mighty whale Moby Dick, the demise of the tormented and crippled captain Ahab, and the absolute visionary destruction of the whaleship Pequod.

Natural motion and the literature of survivance create a vital and astute sense of presence over absence in stories, art, and literature. “The nature of survivance creates a sense of narrative

resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihility, and victimry. Native survivance is an active sense of presence over historical absence” (Vizenor, *Native Liberty* 1; 162).

Herman Melville clearly conveyed the natural motion of sailors and the sea, and he portrayed the tease, trouble and havoc of whalers. Ishmael created a sense of presence and situations of transmotion with tropes, diction, character expressions, irony, and comparative scenes. Consider these selected scenes of natural and visionary motion from various chapters of *Moby-Dick*.

But Queequeg, do you see, was a creature in the transition state—neither caterpillar nor butterfly. He was enough civilized to show off his outlandishness in the strangest possible manner. (29-30)

Queequeg is seen as a creature in “transition,” or natural motion, change, and the evolution of an incredible and memorable character of literature.

Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God. (114) The description of the action is direct, the trope wields and drives, and the visionary motion is “democratic dignity.” God surely “radiates” a constant course of eternal splendor and the steady oceanic ironies of whalers.

While their masters, the mates, seemed afraid of the sound of the hinges of their jaws, the harpooners chewed their food with such a relish that there was a report. (150) This ironic scene favors the natural chewing sounds of harpooners over the manners of the masters at sea on the Pequod.

The Sperm Whale blows as a clock ticks, with the same undeviating and reliable uniformity. And thereby whalers distinguish this fish from other tribes of his genus. (214) The Sperm Whale is distinctive and the natural motion of breath from a blowhole is a reliable count. Melville frequently creates scenes of motion with precise and singular similes, or with comparative images that are common, such as “blows as a clock ticks.”

Now, sometimes, in the Japanese sea, the days in summer are as freshets of effulgences,” Melville writes in Moby-Dick. “That unblinkingly vivid Japanese sun seems the blazing focus of the glassy ocean’s immeasurable burning-glass. The sky looks lacquered; clouds there are none; the horizon floats; and this nakedness of unrelieved radiance is as the insufferable splendors of God’s throne. (487) Melville created some scenes with ornate words, such as “freshets of

effulgences” and “unblinkingly” to enhance the image of motion, or visionary transmotion of the sun and sea near Japan.

Upon the stranger’s shears were beheld the shattered, white ribs, and some few splintered plans, of what had once been a whaleboat; but you now saw through this wreck, as plainly as you see through the peeled, half-unhinged, and bleaching skeleton of a horse. (526) Consider the words “shattered” and “splintered” to recount the whaleboat. These two words create a concise scene of breaking that lingers as an image and then the narrator turns to a comparative phrase, “as plainly as you see,” a verbal gesture to create a new trope, and a sense of motion in the point of view, the peeled and “bleaching skeleton of a horse.”

And thus, through the serene tranquilities of the tropical sea, among waves whose hand-clapping were suspended by exceeding rapture, Moby Dick moved on, still withholding from sight the full terrors of his submerged trunk, entirely hiding the wrenched hideousness of his jaw. (534-35) Moby Dick was a presence in natural motion, and the clapping of waves on a serene tropical sea was “suspended” by “rapture.” The image creates a crucial convergence of natural motion, and the sense of visionary transmotion continues in memory.

Moby Dick swam swiftly round and round the wrecked crew; sideways churning the water in his vengeful wake, as if lashing himself up to still another and more deadly assault. . . . Meanwhile Ahab half smothered in the foam of the whale’s insolent tail, and too much of a cripple to swim,--though he could still keep afloat, even in the heart of such a whirlpool as that; helpless Ahab’s head was seen, like a tossed bubble which the least chance shock might burst. (537) Moby Dick was in natural motion and the narrator portrays the scene with a direct, ordinary, poetic, and rhythmic phrase, “round and round the wrecked crew.” The first image is common, “round and round,” and then the water churns in a vengeful scene.

So suddenly seen in the blue plain of the sea, and relieved against the still bluer margin of the sky, the spray that he raised, for the moment, intolerably glittered and glared like a glacier; and stood there gradually fading and fading away from the first sparkling intensity, to the dim mistiness of an advancing shower in a vale. (544-45) The “blue plains of the sea” is a magical poetic scene in the natural motion of memory. Bluer yet against the sky, and then in visionary transmotion “glittered and glared like a glacier” and faded away “to a dim mistiness of an advancing shower in a vale.”

Suddenly the waters around them slowly swelled in broad circles; they quickly upheaved, as if sideways sliding from a submerged berg of ice, swiftly rising to the surface. . . . Shrouded in a thin drooping veil of mist, it hovered for a moment in the rainbowed air; and then fell swamping back into the deep. Crushed thirty feet upwards, the waters flashed for an instant like heaps of fountains, then brokenly sank in a shower of flakes, leaving the circling surface creamed like new milk round the marble trunk of the whale. (555) Melville once again creates the natural motion of the ocean. Ishmael the narrator was a master of these images, and mainly when he observes the uncertainty of an expansive sea slowly swelling in “broad circles.” The poetic images and visionary transmotion of this scene are magnificent, the shrouds and veils of mist and “rainbowed air” are the mysterious motion of *Moby Dick*. The rise of the great white whale “crushed thirty feet upwards” and with “heaps of fountains” leaves the surface of the sea “creamed like new milk round the marble trunk of the whale.”

Herman Melville portrayed the marvelous character Ishmael as a painter might have done with natural hues of visionary motion, with memorable scenes and tropes of transmotion, and with a sense of survivance over victimry.

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Notes

¹ A fuller discussion in *Manifest Manners*, 57.

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