

NEWSLETTER
of the
Association For Study
of
AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURES

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Association for Studies in American Indian Literatures
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Editor: Karl Kroeber, Columbia University
Bibliographer: La Vonne Ruoff, Univ. Of Illinois, Chicago

The New Newsletter

Our purposes are to facilitate the exchange of information among those teaching American Indian Literatures and to promote appreciation of the literary accomplishments of American Indians. For the present we are concentrating on providing assistance to those teaching, or about to teach, Indian Literatures who have problems in planning courses, devising classroom procedures, and in locating suitable texts.

We wish the Newsletter to be available free to all who can benefit from it. Anyone wishing to receive copies regularly (we publish twice a year, spring and fall) should write to the editor, Department of English, Columbia University, New York, N.Y. 10027.

Announcements: 1977 MLA Meetings

At the Chicago meetings next December there will be a special session chaired by Professor LaVonne Ruoff to review syllabi and bibliographies of contemporary Native American literatures to arrive at a suggested syllabus and a relatively brief, annotated bibliography for general use. Those wishing to participate should contact Professor Ruoff, Dept. of English, Univ. of Illinois, Chicago Circle, Box 4348, Chicago, Ill., 60680, and should send her suggestions for bibliographies and syllabi.

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Prof. Larry Evers has agreed to chair a special session at the Chicago MLA on "Uses of the Media in Teaching Native American Oral Tradition." Those interested should contact Prof. Evers at the Univ. of Arizona, sip 85721.

Anyone interested in participating in or chairing a special session on either "Problems of Translation in Indian Literatures" or "Institutional Obstacles to Development of Native American Curriculum," topics suggested at the New York meeting, should write at once to Ms. Dexter Fisher, MLA, 62 Fifth Ave, New York, N. Y. 10011.

October 20-22 at the Rocky Mountain MLA meeting there will be another symposium in Amer. Indian Literature. Papers (5-7 pp.) may treat contemporary or traditional literature, deal with individual authors or general topics, but focus will be on Trickster tales. Send proposal and papers to Prof. Joe DeFlyer, Box 608, English Dept, McMurray College, Abilene, TX.79605 -- before April 15.

The MLA Commission on Minority Groups will sponsor a Summer Seminar on "Native American Literature: Criticism and Curriculum" at Northern Arizona University, 27 June to 8 July, 1977. 25 participants, teachers, writers, publishers, from the Southwest will discuss ways of creating and improving courses in Native American literature. The seminar will be conducted by Terry Wilson, John Rouillard, and Larry Evers, with Paula Gunn Allen and Dexter Fisher as resource people. For more information and applications write Ms. Dexter Fisher, Modern Language Assoc, 62 Fifth Ave, New York, NY 10011. Deadline for receipt of applications in April 8, 1977.

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Indian Literature and Critical Responsibility

More and more literary critics are discovering that their most challenging calls are coming from across cultural boundaries and American critics are realizing that the cultural boundaries within the geographical confines of the United States can mark literary terrains that require added critical equipment and revised critical attitudes. Bernth Lindfors has described the attitude that should characterize a cross-cultural critic who must recognize personal limitations, fortify himself or herself with every scrap of cultural information available and then inch warily but insistently into the area.(1) It is advice that critics of Native American literature do well to heed. Today's Native American writers are compelling critics to probe into the cultural foundations for a developing literature. It is an exciting task but it is also a sensitive one because most of these writers have established and depend on an especially close relation between the writer, the work, and the traditional community -- a relation that determines the contextual semantics of the work and therefore shapes the author's options regarding text structure. Comments like Leslie Silko's "I grew up at Laguna Pueblo. . . .This place that I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being"(2), illustrate a writer's perceptions of her artistic debt to the traditional community. Then we have the challenging statements by N. Scott Momaday, who speaks of aspects of the traditional lore of his people as being "in a sense definitive of the tribal mind," and of his notion that literature is "the end product of the evolutionary process, and the so-called oral tradition is primarily a stage within that process, a stage that is indispensable and perhaps original as well"(3).

If Momaday's and Silko's statements have any theoretical significance at all, they must be examined in relation to the work of other writers, and to do that we need conceptual tools and critical vocabulary for discussing just how it is that one's local tradition, seen as somehow definitive of the tribal mind, provides a set of optional approaches to form and content that a writer can employ to develop the tradition's dynamic potential. One convenient way into the text is to group authors according to the way they utilize a particular tradition to develop structurally active or significant elements of a text. But before I describe this approach, I want to clarify what I mean when I refer to the "traditional."

Momaday's assertion that certain symbolic events are "definitive of the tribal mind" is one that I take seriously. I assume an identifiable process of cultural adaptation that members of any culture both consistently participate in and criticize, so that what is definitive does not become deterministic. The process is the historical development whereby social structures and values progressively define the semantic features of certain basic cultural and linguistic categories. The semantic ambit of these categories is articulated through basic symbols that function to structure many forms of cultural expression. We can illustrate with the well-known example of the way that similarity of structure in relationship among family members, the body politic, and the cosmic community of animate and inanimate beings is expressed in many tribes through the use of the circle as multi-vocal symbol expressing unity in diversity. When people know the vital link between the symbols and social realities, they are prodded to critical thought about society and the discrepancies between the ideals toward which the symbols point and the

realities of the historical situation. In traditional societies of all kinds we find that the link between symbol and situation is dramatized in oral literature, which has always had an important part to play in shaping the way people view the nature of their own historical development. Within the context of a story or an oral history recital, people examine the dynamics of the struggle between change-resistant and change-oriented social forces. The link between basic symbols and the social realities they refer to remains dynamic as long as the symbol is not cut off from its own results and prevented from evoking thoughts of yet unrealized possibilities. The traditional role of the artist in tribal societies has been to keep alive the people's perceptions of the link between basic symbols and social processes. It is a role that many Native American writers continue to assume and that non-Indians writing about Indians often try to emulate. In this paper, therefore, "tradition" does not refer to a static body of historical facts but to a symbolic process of comparing an historically conditioned notion of what ought to be with what is. This process provides the contextual matrix for works of literature and can be a structuring force for specific texts. I will discuss four different ways in which Native American literary efforts reflect the process through intrinsic structure and significance.

The first approach involves adopting oral literary forms and adapting them to employ some of the structural characteristics of the oral tradition within a written mode. This is difficult to do well, because oral narrative experience is multisensory and dependent on a specific context. The most successful example is Momaday's legend collection, The Way to Rainy Mountain. By using three narrative voices, the mythic, the historical, and the personal, he can show something of the dynamics of audience participation in an oral literary context. Features of the mythic recital trigger historical and personal associations for a

listener who emerges from the recital with a richer knowledge of who he or she is in relation to the community and its accumulative self-articulation through the story-telling process that links personal response to communal images.

Jerome Rothenberg has also tried to capture the multisensory impact of oral poetry through translations which are not merely translations. Rothenberg says of his method: "Since tribal poetry was almost always part of a larger situation (i.e., was truly intermedia), there was no more reason to present words alone as independent structures than the ritual events, say, or pictographs arising from the same source. Where possible, in fact, one might present or translate all elements connected with the total 'poem.'" (4) If we accept the validity of what Rothenberg has tried to do, then evaluating how well he succeeded requires relating his commentaries on the original context of the poems to his "re-creations" in order to determine whether or not his reworking presents what he calls the "total poem," or whether it removes the poem from any possible relation to an existing Native American tradition.

Another controversial artist who attempts to adapt oral forms is Hyemoyohsts Storm. The controversy over Storm's work dramatizes how strong the tie between the oral forms and the original social context continues to be. (5) Storm tried to reinterpret that bond and in the process he obscured specific tribal references. The response of some Cheyenne people (as well as critics like Rupert Costo) shows that one cannot so reinterpret with impunity. Storm assumed the story-teller's prerogative to adapt to an audience, and he expanded the social context of his work to include a world-wide audience. He adapts some Cheyenne stories and he writes new stories based on oral forms. In order to evoke the sense of performance he has used such stylistic devices as capitalized letters to indicate the story-teller's inflections. Storm's example is instructive both in its failures and in its successes.

The second use of tradition differentiates more sharply between oral and written literary forms in that it uses a form distinctively part of the written tradition, the novel. It uses an Indian setting and Indian characters. But it does not use Indian esthetic and philosophic traditions to shape the novel's basic structure. The text conveys only those levels of meaning that are familiar to a non-Indian audience or that can be explained through descriptive data incorporated into the novel. The problems of the method are many. There is risk of either an overload of descriptive material or superficial coverage of differences between Indian culture and other cultures. A frequent flaw in these novels is inadequate character motivation. One early work that demonstrates the approach and deserves attention is Adolf Bandelier's The Delight Makers. Bandelier succeeds better than most with the delicate task of incorporating ethnographic explanations for plot action. Many popular novels that non-Indians have written about Indians are less successful.

The third use of tradition shows adoption of Native American categories to define the nature of the style and the character motivation. The author taps the unique stylistic resources of a tribal language to create an English style with powers of expression that are dependent upon the tribal language. Emerson Blackhorse Mitchell's autobiographical novel Miracle Hill derives most of its impact from the fact that the English style is created by the dialect of those for whom Navaho is a first language. A sensitive artist like Mitchell can show that the English language is much more flexible than any English speakers believe.

To bring character motivation into line with an integral worldview is to show something of the individual's vital links with his culture. All writers try to show these links, but only a few succeed well enough to merit attention to their means. A work that depends on the author's perception of differences between the characters' motivational matrix and the readers' is Frank Water's The Man Who Killed the Deer. Water's

Native American writings stem from his preoccupation with the way that a culture can affect personal freedom, and in criticizing his work we need to remember his effort to understand relations between culture and personality.

The fourth structural use of tradition is the most important and the most deserving of attention. It employs the traditional as a substratum or as an infrastructure: the story being told can only be grasped fully in terms of its likeness to or difference from some underlying structure of action. The underlying structure refers to formalized traditional patterns and expectations that are generally celebrated through ritual and festivity. An author can forge a theme by establishing a dialectical relation between the change-resistant and change-oriented elements of the actual society he is describing. Time, place, and character unfold in a modern setting informed by the traditional in such a way that the relation between old and new is the organizing center of the work. Images can activate parallel images from the past, thereby making the past a living presence in the contemporary consciousness. Traditional oral narratives, song, and prayers can be used to present an emotional structure derived from a particular way of life. As the novelist gives expression to the contemporary meaning of these emotional structures he parallels the role of the ancient storyteller who tells the people who they are. Perhaps the best example of a novelist who consciously assumes this role and uses the conventions I've described is N. Scott Momaday. As most readers perceive and most critics explain, his novel is informed by the cultural meanings surrounding the Night Chant, from which the title, House Made of Dawn, is taken. Momaday manipulates the various levels of meaning by three narrative voices, the mythic, historical, and personal. We can study the evolution of the principle of narration by comparing his Way to Rainy Mountain, which is organized so that the three voices gradually come together in the course of a symbolic personal journey, which also informs the novel. But in the novel the principle of narration results in greater complexity. Juxtaposition of expressions

of each voice is a major device of the novel (just as it was in the legend collection), but in the novel each voice must be intricately interwoven with the others to develop the plot. The personal voice is presented through the protagonist Abel. The historical voice narrates events in the lives of Abel's grandfather and the village priest, while the mythic is presented through descriptions of the rituals and the meaning of the land. Through this structure Momaday can involve all of his characters in patterns of movement toward understanding, regeneration, and reintegration. The result is a novel remarkable for the perceptive depth of its statements on what it means to be a member of an integral, conservative culture in a world that threatens all such cultures.

It is easy to see how Momaday's works employ narrative techniques that related to southwestern mythologies and cultures, but it is more difficult to see similar patterns in James Welch's novel, Winter in the Blood, which at first reading seems to be structurally independent of its ethno-historical foundations. Yet Welch effects transformation of thematic structures and images that derive from Blackfeet culture. One thematic structure involves the levels of meaning that the Blackfeet assign the notion of distance. In every integral culture there are activities that express something of the culture's fundamental meaning and uniqueness. Images from Welch's poems and from his novel indicate that he uses the Blackfeet race over the hills to the hunt as such an emblematic activity. The hunt brought back what the people needed. It was a journey that made distance meaningful. Once such cultural overtones are perceived, it becomes clear that in the course of his novel Welch has effected a transformation from a negative distance that kept the hero from self-knowledge to a positive, creative distance that could be a means for the hero to relate to self, nature, and society. Welch's use of cultural-semantic features enables him to show that while the world remains cockeyed and greedy, there are possibilities of growth within the traditional way of life.

And it is important to recognize that the possibilities are limited to a tradition's particularities. The particular and unique features of each tradition exist because of the a unique history, and the critic must be specific about any author's references to the sources of strength in each tradition.

The four approaches outlined here are a means of generating questions that lead a reader to the specific textual qualities that result from the way the real world affects intrinsic aspects of a text. Native American writers have opened discourse to new possibilities of meaning. By examining the imaginative possibilities present in each writer's approach to the traditional, the critic can work hand in hand with the creative writer in showing how to move in a direction defined by tradition without falling back on the past as the solution to present-day problems. Critics must avoid the temptation to confine dynamic literary works to static categories that seem to characterize Native American literature. They must try to understand how each really good work of this literature both fulfills and transcends a growing, developing tradition. In its fulfillment the work relates directly to a specific audience and its struggle. In its transcendence the work becomes universal in its implications.. The best examples of local literature become world literature.

Notes

1) Bernth Lindfors, "Critical Approaches to Folklore in African Literature," African Folklore (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. 224. (2) Leslie Silko, "Notes by Contributors," Man to Send Rain Clouds (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 176. (3) N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Made of Words," Indian Voices: The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars (San Francisco: The Indian Historian Press, 1970). (4) Jerome Rothenberg, Shaking the Pumpkin (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. xxi. (5) The argument over the relative merits of Seven Arrows was published in Wassaja, the newspaper published by the American Indian Historical Association, April-May 1974 and August 1974. Vine Deloria reviewed the book in Natural History 81:96, no. 72.

* Elaine Jahner, Lincoln, Neb.

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In the first ASAIL Newsletter in 1974 Larry Evers surveyed anthologies of Native American Literatures. We hope to continue this kind of report. We welcome citations anyone cares to send, plus brief comments like those below. If opinions differ significantly, we'll re-cite the same book.

Curtis, Natalie, ed. The Indians' Book (New York: Dover, 1968). A reprint, physically strong and inexpensive, of a book originally published in 1907 and exhibiting qualities of that era. Covers few tribes but most sections of country. Legends and stories used as contexts for songs, and includes Indian art work. Curtis' translations are madly Victorian, but she includes the Indian text with literal translation and pronouncing guide as well as the music for each text. The only available book for anyone teaching a broad range of traditional poetry and not modern translations thereof.

Bierhorst, John, ed. Four Masterworks of American Literature (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1974). Useful translation of Quetzacoatl, Cubeb By Roys, and for North-Americanists, Fenton and Hewitt's Ritual of Condolence, and Matthews' Night Chant (condensed). Introductions and notes for each; some will disagree with interpretations, but the book makes uniquely available longer ceremonial texts and deserves a warm welcome.

Theodore Clinton, New York City

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We hope in the next issue to begin listings of journals and magazines publishing material by Native American Writers. Some of these have only local or regional circulation, so we will be grateful if you can send us any information on such publications, including names, editors, place of publication, and the like.

