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"ETHNICITY" AS A "KEY WORD": NOTES TOWARD A DEFINITION

The term "ethnicity" has become crucial in anthropological, sociological, and literary approaches to American culture. Functioning as what Raymond Williams calls a "key word" in contemporary American culture, the noun "ethnicity" has an interesting context, having emerged but recently in the course of a significant debate. Understanding the context may help us to understand the function of "ethnicity."

The noun is derived from the older adjective and noun, "ethnic," which goes back to the Greek words for "nation" and "heathen," used in the Greek Bible translation for the Hebrew "goyim," non-Israelites, gentiles. From the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries "ethnic" was used pejoratively, in the sense of pagan, non-Christian. Only in the mid-nineteenth century did the more familiar meaning of "ethnic" as "peculiar to a race or nation" emerge. But the language retains overtones of "ethnic" as "heathen," now secularized to "other," non-standard, somehow "un-American." This connotation persists from Jacob Riis' muckraking yet often stereotyped account of How the Other Half Lives (1890) to Kathleen Wright's handbook of American minorities, The Other Americans (1971). Implicit in the older antithesis of "ethnic" and "Christian" and in the newer opposition of "ethnic" and "American" was the assumption that ethnics could be, perhaps had to be converted, "de-ethnicized," in order to be saved, or in order to become fully American. In such a context everything that now might be called "ethnicity" appeared merely as an obstacle in a transforming process, which was to convert Native Americans and

immigrants, African slaves, and, perhaps, even English Puritans, into "real" Americans.

The noun "ethnicity" was first used, according to the 1972 supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary, in 1953, in the context of a debate about McCarthyism, loyalty, and intellectual freedom. In response to an article by the poet Archibald MacLeish, who had drawn a bleak picture of the limitations imposed on intellectual freedom in McCarthyist America, David Riesman made "Some Observations on Intellectual Freedom," in the course of which he guardedly affirmed the continued existence of liberty in America. The Harvard sociologist resorts three times to a discussion of ethnic group life and tensions, and, in the third instance, apparently without being aware of his innovation, introduces the term "ethnicity."²

Riesman's American Scholar essay first calls attention to ethnic victims in America's past, a past he feels MacLeish had idealized. "If. . . a rough toleration has at times been maintained within our country, . . . fears and hatreds have found outlets against Indians, Mexicans, Spaniards and Japanese. . ." (12) Far from sharing MacLeish's apocalyptic views, however, Riesman sees "our ethnic diversity, our regional and religious pluralism" (14) as a safeguard against the possibilities of fascism in the United States. What was bad in America's past as ethnic hatred and what is good in America's present as anti-totalitarian diversity becomes, in Riesman's third and most significant reference, a source of strength and tension which outweighs concerns for power struggles and antagonisms between "the people" and "bosses."

There is a tendency for the older 'class strggles,' rooted in clear hierarchical antagonisms, to be replaced by a new sort of warfare: the groups who, by reason of rural or small-town location, ethnicity, or other parochialism, feel threatened by the better educated upper-middle-class people (though often less wealthy and politically powerful) who follow or create the modern movements in science, art, literature, and opinion generally.

"ethnicity" thus emerges in the context of a shift from a concern for power relations to an interest in the contradiction between modernized, de-ethnicized intellectuals and artists and parochial, regional, ethnic sentiments. While responding to MacLeish's outcry that radical dissent and a leftist perspective were endangered in McCarthyist America, Riesman argued, in fact, that the very basis of what appeared as "witch hunts" to "obscurantist" intellectuals was not to be found in power relationships, but in a struggle between intellectual urbanity and artistic modernity on the one hand and parochial ethnicity and small-town identity on the other. The term "ethnicity" offered a framework for an interpretation of America as a country beyond class struggles. This origin of "ethnicity" helps to explain the continuous polemic against "ethnic studies" that they were invented with an "ideological intention": "If you cut the cake ethnically, classes become less apparent."³

In the two decades since Riesman's coinage, the term "ethnicity" has become a household word. Andrew M. Greeley discussed the difficulties of the term in Ethnicity in the United States: A Preliminary Reconnaissance (1974):

'Ethnicity' in the wider sense refers to any differentiation based on nationality, race, religion, or language. Part of the problem in thinking clearly about ethnicity in the American context is that some groups that Americans think of as 'ethnic' are constituted by religion (Jews), some by nationality (Poles), some by religion and nationality (Irish Catholics), some by race (blacks). . . some by language. . . and some by region. (291)

The definitions are increasingly larger and more positive; ethnic consciousness has been transformed from an obstacle into a pre-requisite for a truly American identity. Michael Novak, who popularizes and proselytizes the new ethnicity in his Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics (1971), asks all Americans

to find an ethnic answer to the persistent identity question, "who am I?" The traditional answer, "I am an American" (or, I am in the process of becoming an American) no longer suffices; we remain "nothing" until we become aware of our own specific ethnic identity. According to Novak, one soon discovers that one does have roots in a real or an imaginary ethnic group, to which one belongs "in part involuntarily, in part by choice. Given a grandparent or two, one chooses to shape one's consciousness by one history rather than another." (56) In fact, there is no more history, there are only histories to choose from. By adopting a specific ethnic group history, an American nothing becomes an ethnic somebody; and the affirmative "I am somebody, too" is supposed to apply to everybody. Every American is a potential ethnic. According to Greeley, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants are an ethnic group like any other; and according to Novak, Americans with mixed or untraceable origins may creatively establish a "voluntary" or "imaginary" ethnicity of their own. In fact, this is their only chance to avoid remaining "nothings": in an interesting inversion Americanness has become heathenish and ethnicity sacred.

Then we go back to Riesman's opposition between ethnics and intellectuals, we may be surprised to find that even that contradiction has given way to the omnivorous term ethnicity. Greeley suggested, not altogether facetiously, we regard "intellectuals as an Ethnic Group."⁴ More, intellectuals and artists seem to be surpassing non-intellectual ethnics in ethnic consciousness, which has given rise to a literature of ethnocentric exhortation by once de-ethnicized and now re-ethnicized writers. The new ethnicity is such an intellectual and artistic phenomenon that Herbert Gans has argued that the proponents of the ethnic revival have ignored the statistically more relevant continuing drive toward assimilation in most American ethnic groups. For Gans, the ethnic revival is perhaps merely a fashion that may pass like the notion of a religious revival in the 1950's. Most

likely, Novak's "unmelttable ethnics" are primarily nostalgic academics and intellectuals who are wrong, Gans says, "when they claim to represent others than themselves."⁵ It remains surprising, though, that at least parts of the group Riesman posited as antagonistic to "ethnicity" have become, often quite vociferous, spokesmen for an ethnic consciousness. If intellectuals once were seen as unequivocal missionaries of universalism, they now often propagate a new parochialism.

How does the inversion of the value scale of "ethnicity" and Americanness affect contemporary writers? For one thing, the new evaluation of "non-American" traits has led to a wide-spread interest in "ethnic" writing and thus created a demand for "authentic" literature about other than "mainstream" backgrounds. This boom in publishing is not limited to Black, Jewish, and immigrant writers, but extends to Puerto Rican, Chicano, and Native American authors. The new literary opportunities have occasionally been seen as a danger to the "authenticity" of ethnic literature: as the market and the desirability of ethnic writing increases, writers will emerge who use ethnicity merely as a device. For example, the lavishly illustrated, beautifully designed book by Hyemeyohsts Storm, Seven Arrows (Harper & Row, 1972), was seen as the direct expression of "hundreds of years of Indian life," as a true rendition of "the Cheyenne way. . . and Indian conception of the universe and the meaning of life," or as a "beautiful, moving testament to the spiritual culture and wisdom of the Plains People."⁶ These evaluations were based on an erroneous assumption of folk authenticity, and the reviewer in the American Anthropologist, a student of Cheyenne religious symbolism, was disappointed by Storm: "Several books would be required to correct the compounded inaccuracies of Storm's version of Cheyenne tradition."⁷ The criticism expressed here and in the Indian Historian, however, is limited by a view of Seven Arrows as folklore, not as literature. Measured against the yardstick of folk authenticity, Seven Arrows may be characterized as "fakelore" (Richard Dorson's term). As a writer of fiction, after all, a form of lying, Hyemeyohsts Storm is in the main tradition

of American minority and ethnic writers, who have taken folk materials as a point of departure, as the basis of invention, as a vehicle in an act of communication which is essentially trans-ethnic. Charles Chesnutt "invented" his own Black folklore in his prose fiction of the 1890's just as Storm may be inventing his in the 1970's. Chesnutt, however, had to wage his literary struggle at a time when ethnicity was still more of a liability than it is for writers in the age of Momaday and Storm. I suspect that there will be a flourishing of "new" ethnic literature, which will perhaps be less and less authentic in the anthropological sense as literary America becomes more and more ethnic.

1. Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, 1780-1950 (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. xi-xviii.
2. Archibald MacLeish, "Loyalty and Freedom," American Scholar, 22, n. 4 (Aut, 1953), pp. 393-98. David Riesman, "Some Observations on Intellectual Freedom," American Scholar, 23, n. 1 (Wint, 1953-54), pp. 9-25, esp. pp. 12, 14, 15.
3. Andrew Hacker, "Cutting Classes," New York Review of Books, March 4, 1976, p. 17.
4. New York Times Magazine, July 12, 1970, p. 22
5. "Preface," Neil C. Sandberg, Ethnic Identity and Assimilation (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. xiii.
6. Library Journal, July, 1972, p. 2436; Wall Street Journal, January 16, 1973, p. 18.
7. John H. Moore, American Anthropologist, 75 (1973), p. 1041. Cf. also Rupert Costo, "Seven Arrows Desecrates Cheyenne," The Indian Historian, 5, p. 2.

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Adolf Hungry Wolf. The Blood People: A Division of the Blackfoot Confederacy: An Illustrated Interpretation of the Old Ways. New York: Harper & Row; 1977. pp. xiii + 370. HB. \$12.95 Copiously illustrated with photographs.

The Blood People provides a guide to those who want to understand the rich traditional culture of the

Blackfoot people. Hungry Wolf's purpose was to write "a permanent record so that future generations might yet benefit from the spiritual ways of their ancestors."

The Sun Dance of 1972 provided him with a context and framework for his comments. Events occurring during the Sun Dance serve as take-off points for stories about personalities, customs, and ceremonies, both contemporary and historical. The book is neither literature nor ethnography nor history but a composite of all three. Hungry Wolf quotes extensively from earlier ethnographic work to give historical depth to his own observations, but the main value of the book lies in its details about feelings. For instance, Hungry Wolf recounts a visit by an old man who comes to tell a version of the creation myth. "He lapsed into silence, sorting out the story in his mind. We sat quietly so that he would not get the feeling we were impatient." Such comments inform us of the texture of life in a Sun Dance camp and give us hints about how oral traditions truly function.

The Sun Dance framework does not operate rigidly, and sometimes the connection between a particular section of the book and the total frame appears tenuous. Some readers may even complain about lack of continuity and order, but they will have missed the vitally complex importance of the religiously-oriented Sun-Dance context. As Paul Tillich realized, religion is the dimension of depth in the totality of the human spirit. By constantly referring a wide and diverse range of Blackfoot activities to the Sun Dance context, Hungry Wolf illuminates the dimension of depth in Blackfoot culture. He explores the creativity in his culture in a way that only those intensely participating in a culture can explore it.

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Leslie Marmon Silko. Ceremony. New York: Viking, 1977. pp. 262. HB. \$10.00

It now seems clear that one of the major problems of the American Indian author is the fusing together of three extremely different materials. We can call them Myth, History, and Present Experience; they correspond, roughly, to the three kinds of literature which students and teachers also face in a present-day class in American Indian Literature. "Myth" is the oral literature of Origins and Cosmology which still survives in living Indian languages and which was so abundantly collected, with varying success, by folklorists and anthropologists. "History" is the epic battles, famines, and migrations which have happened since the white man. Sometimes it is remembered, sometimes it is written. Most characteristically it is in dictated autobiographies, though they are as diverse as Black Elk's and Black Hawk's. "Present Experience" is the condition of people trapped in the waste and futility of modern city and reservation. It is impossible to set precise dates on these kinds of material, but they closely approximate three periods of Indian life: the Old (before Europeans), the Change (in times of first contact with Europeans, and just after), and the Present (when most Americans have decided all the real Indians are dead).

Momaday's Way to Rainy Mountain uses one effective, simple way of relating these periods: the juxtaposition of fragments from them on adjacent pages but in different typefaces, in order to show how Kiowa myth and history and his own family reminiscences all support and comment upon one another. Lacking such a sustaining sense of faith, history, and personal purpose, his protagonist Abel in House Made of Dawn flounders through the Second World War, murder, prison, and the wastelands of Los Angeles, until he finally rejoins "the race against evil" and the traditions of the Navajo. Hyemeyohsts Storm's Seven Arrows uses mainly the mythic materials of Plains Indian Cosmology, woven

through an imaginative recreation of the Plains Wars... until we come to the brief epilogue in which Seven Arrows recalls the Seven Dwarfs and Hawk and his students emerge as an old man climbing into a pick-up to go fishing with his grandson. James Welch's Winter in the Blood shortens the three periods into three symbolic generations. His nameless protagonist overcomes the comic-brutal alienation of the northern Montana High Line and his homelessness in his mother's house when he discovers his true grandfather.

Now, to join Momaday, Storm, and Welch is Leslie Silko and Ceremony. Her protagonist is a Laguna Indian veteran of World War II, Tayo. The "Myths" are Laguna stories of the origins of droughts and good harvests, the "witchery" that created white people, and other stories of Spiderwoman, Hummingbird, Buzzard, Bearboy and Sun Man. "History," in this case, is World War II, in which Tayo and other Indians actually fought alongside the whites, gaining momentary glory, but also losing brothers, losing contact with their past, and, when it was over, losing self-respect in years of bitter drinking and brawling. Drunken Ira Hayes.

Silko, however, has her own methods and perspectives. For one thing, in the macho world of American Indian cultures -- at least, as they are perceived by whites and, I think, as many Indian males perceive themselves -- Silko makes women the source of inspiring power and regeneration. The whole book takes place or is told from the mind of Ts'its'tsi'nako, "Thought-woman, the spider." The most beautiful and sublime of the agents in Tayo's healing is a kind of living goddess of the mountains, an Indian-Hippy Priestess whose name, we finally learn, is just Ts'eh. Secondly, Silko moves in and out of the many parts of her story with ease. She can create a voice and arouse interest instantly. While other storytellers may just be getting ready, lighting their pipes or opening beer, she is

off and going. She merges one story with another, fades them in and out, stops them, and piles them one on another like a bard, or like a Spiderwoman, a Weaver. Finally, and perhaps because she is such an artist of all stories, she is very sophisticated about the mysterious realities and unrealities that stories possess. Even while using these conflicting materials of myth, history, and the present, she challenges the differences between them.

"You should understand the way it was back then, because it is the same even now," Silko once wrote (in the opening of her "Story-Telling Story," which she read a few years ago in a TV interview with Larry Evers). I have never heard a more succinct, colloquial summation of the storyteller's creed -- the relevance of myth and history to present experience. Tayo, like thousands of other modern boys and girls, black and brown, white and red, was taught in school that stories are just foolish superstitions. His regeneration depends, in part, on learning anew that myth tells the truth. It repeats itself. It describes the processes of the earth and of the heart and mind. It fixes us because it fixes our attention and makes us look at important matters. It also contains the pride of a people, preserving their identity in history. "You don't have anything/ if you don't have the stories," says another of Silko's opening voices. If the stories are "confused or forgotten," the people "would be defenseless then." This is why the tying together of myth, history, and the present is so vital in contemporary Indian writing. It makes it Indian writing. Rediscovery of stories and ancestry symbolizes continuity of the people.

On the other hand, another part of Silko's creed is that stories and ceremonies must change. Betonie, an old medicine man in Gallup, New Mexico, tells Tayo that ceremonies have always been changing: "things which don't shift and grow are dead things." The words

seem strange, coming from Betonie, who lives in a delapidated hogan stuffed with hundreds of calendars and phone books from all over America. He himself is a kind of dusty data bank of myth, history and the present all stored together. But this contradiction seems to be his strength, and his value to Tayo is that he does not pretend to cure Tayo of drinking and guilt and bad memories of the War. He teaches a certain discipline and a certain common sense, and he prophesies: "Remember these stars / which he has drawn in the earth, I've seen them and I've seen the spotted cattle; I've seen a mountain and I've seen a woman."

The fulfillment of Tayo's cure thus depends on a quest, rather than on static traditional ceremonies, rather than on a more or less fortuitous return to old ways. He must go off into the mountains seeking a small herd of near-legendary Mexican cattle, which his uncle once tried to raise because they could withstand the droughts of the Southwest. In the course of the quest, he meets Ts'eh, the modern Spiderwoman and priestess, finds the cattle in the captivity of some brutal-stupid Texans, loses them in a snowstorm, and then finds them again in an arroyo, where they have been held in an ancient snare, made by floods and Ts'eh's concealed improvements. Yet he is still not safe. His new habits are suspected by his old buddies from the bars, who are out to kill him. They pursue him to the site of a Government uranium mine, where he sees the mad designs of modern war and the delicate patterns in uranium ore, the conflicts of greed and brotherhood. Then he watches three of these old buddies torture a fourth, who was supposed to trick him. At points some of this becomes farfetched, too obviously contrived and too ostentatiously "symbolic," but it also contains some of the most exciting and beautiful writing in the book. The interludes with Ts'eh and the hunt for the cattle are like brilliant passages from a dream.

Yet when this climax and healing were over, I finally realized that I had been in an unreal world that was not

myth, not history, and not the present either. Or it was pieces and colors of all of them. With its quests and prophecies, the woman with her herbs and the fantastic cattle of the sun, it was a world of romance. And I loved it. This, I realized, is what had been missing from the male-dominated literature of myth, history, and realism. This was the necessary fourth world where the other three could be mixed and transfigured, transcended. A delight in romance and a willingness to accept it, not as real but as a unifying ideal, might be the way in which to reconcile and renew. The world of the end of Ceremony was not on the earth but was in the stars. The romances of James Fenimore Cooper had helped the Whites to gain their early 19th century reconciliations; this romance of Leslie Silko might help Indians and Whites to gain some necessary late twentieth-century ones.

Nevertheless, some white, male scepticism pulls me back from complete acceptance. At the end of the novel, Silko keeps repeating that her solution "isn't easy. It has never been easy." Applied to Tayo's cure, this is so. He has been through romantio tests and ordeals. Silko may also be speaking about the trials of writing such an ambitious book. But she has in one respect made it "easy" by making Tayo a character with the capacity for growth and healing, while not being so generous with his drinking buddies. They are less interesting, have little color, and the early scenes with them are comparatively dull. Tayo's own situation would have been clearer if these characters had been more strongly realized.

Still, Ceremony obviously raises important questions, even if it does not settle them. Silko is clearly seeking to make literature a form of medicine, of healing. This is just the first ceremony.

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Dan Cushman. Stay Away, Joe. Great Falls, Montana: Stay Away, Joe Publishers, 1953. 249pp.\$7.95 HB

This is the kind of book one would expect to have sunk into the swamp of oblivion which is the final, and proper, resting place for most novels about Indians by non-Indians. One would have expected such a resting place especially for this novel. Dan Cushman claims not to have studied anything about Indians before he wrote the book, and its "hero" Joe Champlain embodies all of the stereotypical qualities we would expect to find in a work by a western novelist prejudiced against reservation Indians. Joe is dishonest, cheating not only white men but also his Indian friends and even members of his own family. He is lazy, refusing to take or keep the jobs offered to him. Instead he rides broncs in local rodeos, only to squander his winnings on booze, cars, booze, girls, and booze. He brags about his heroic career as a Marine, yet he is easily vanquished by his step-mother with a stove poker in her hand, and by his sister. Yes, yes, we have seen him before, this drunken, brawling, cowardly, good-for-nothing Indian, and Stay Away, Joe should have long ago bit the dust. Fortunately, however, it is still with us, and currently available from Stay Away, Joe Publishers, Bx 2054, Great Falls, 59403.

Joe is a Cree-Assiniboin who returns from Korea with a Purple Heart, a powerful thirst, and a Korean scalp for Chief Two Smokes, his Cree great-grandfather. He arrives on the night when his father is with friends, celebrating his acquisition of a herd of twenty Herefords. They are a gift from the Government, and are designed to encourage the shiftless Louie Champlain to become a good selfish white-style capitalist rancher. The troubles begin when Louie's friends, to celebrate his good fortune and Joe's return, butcher the only bull. The rest of the novel is concerned with Joe's comic attempts to get a replacement bull, and with Joe's sister's attempts to be successfully wooed by the white electrical

engineer whom Joe despises. Why is this unlikely story still worth reading?

In part because people are still reading it. It is the kind of underground classic which people interested in contemporary Indians hear about and find copies of. And it is one of the very few novels about Indians which Indians themselves read. In Custer Died for Your Sins Vine Deloria, Jr calls Stay Away, Joe "the favorite of Indian people."

People are still reading Stay Away, Joe because it is entertaining. It is funny, fast-moving, and unpretentious, the kind of thing most literature was before someone told it that it had to be Unfunny, Difficult, and Important. Also, it gives us as accurate a picture as good fiction can of the kinds of Indians who live on today's western reservations: the traditionals (Chief Two Smokes), the young traditionals who have a hell of a time being anything remotely "indian" in the modern world (Joe), the acculturated ones who are, or who want too-desperately to become, white (Annie and Marie), and the fence-sitters, blown about by the gusts from the other groups (Louie). More than one anthropologist has recommended Stay Away, Joe for the authenticity of its depiction of contemporary Indians, the problems they face, and the solutions they come up with. Perhaps most important, reading Stay Away, Joe gives us valuable insight into the nature of the audience which enjoys it. Why has this novel been so popular among whites (it became a Book-of-the-Month Club Selection, a Broadway musical called Whoop-up, a Hollywood movie starring Elvis Presley)? Why, especially, do other Indians like unheroic Joe? A partial answer to the last is that Joe is a trickster figure, the kind of culture hero combined with buffoon already familiar to many Indians from even a cursory knowledge of their

own tribal tales. Stay Away, Joe will not stay away. A quarter century later it is still with us and in print. No one interested in the fun and frustration of what it is to be an American Indian today should miss it. Stick around, Joe.

1. For an extended discussion, see "The Popularity of Dan Cushman's Stay Away, Joe among American Indians," Arizona Quarterly, 33 (1977), pp.216-40.
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The journal Shantih plans an issue devoted to Native American arts and literatures. Poetry, fiction, essays, art work may be sent to Brian Swann, The Cooper Union, New York, N.Y. 10003. Deadline is September 1, 1978.

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Subscriptions (\$5/yr) to Latin American Indian Literatures, ed. Juan Adolfo Vazquez available, Dept. of Hispanic Languages, Univ. of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260. Vol I (1977) available still.

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