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# AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURE: A TRADITION OF RENEWAL

## I.

"In the earliest times when both people and animals lived on earth," the Eskimo storyteller relates, "a person could become an animal if he wanted to and an animal could become a human being. Sometimes they were people and sometimes animals and there was no difference."

The primordial paradise is a precondition for most Native American mythologies. This almost-heaven on earth featured absolute equivalence between man and beast. Both enjoyed equal access to the conjuring potency of words. "All spoke the same language," the storyteller continues. "That was a time when words were like magic. The human mind had mysterious powers. A word spoken by chance might have strange consequences. It would suddenly come alive and what people wanted to happen, could happen. All you had to do was say it. Nobody could explain this. That's the way it was."

The compelling influence of this mystical realm, when, as the Duwamish of Washington say, "mountains and stars and rocks were living things," is the bedrock of tribal American memory. There the supernatural was commonplace. Ambiguity reigned serenely. Animals and people shifted identity with hardly a whisper; an animal would push up its muzzle or a bird its beak -- "like a mask, the Eskimos describe it -- and suddenly assume human form. Fluid interchangeability, an atmosphere entirely tranquil yet infinitely mysterious, immortality, language an instantaneous mode for casting spells on events, these characterized this timeless "pre-human flux" when heaven was so close you could practically stroke it. This age had no need of shamans or storytellers; it was the stuff their performances and tales would be made of in the next.

## II

Then culture came to North America. Man's second generation proudly dubbed themselves Human Beings, First Men, Spontaneous Men, The People, and up to 1492, the rest is oral folklore.

Culture's mixed blessing brought tribal differentiation, social institutions, status, strife, insecurity, fear, death, the irrevocable breach with animals, the loss of magical speech, and the compensatory powers of imagination and symbolization. Man turned on his brother; he became hunter and farmer and devourer. The Cherokee say that animals retaliated, visiting sickness upon them. Thereafter a Cherokee's manhood was fulfilled by apprenticeship to the passive kingdom of plants which would, if he were assiduous, yield antidotes to specific ills turned loose by the aggressive animal world. A shaky balance was restored. Tribal man across the continent learned what was to be his destiny: forever restoring balance in his world, using his symbolizing imagination to renew, renew, renew -- ceaselessly, cyclically striving to revisit paradise and taste its healing powers. Historians of religion have offered a beguiling phrase for traditional man's abiding feeling of primal loss, they call it "nostalgia for paradise."

Although tribal man's choice of culture was irreversible, animals, mountains, rivers and rainbows retained their divinity together with their ancient powers. If tribal man worked terribly hard at it he found they would grace him with ecstatic glimpses of his former state. Now human beings returned to the natural world as supplicants. Untainted by presumptions of culture, animals were custodians of the old mysteries. Talking animals would inspire the first tribal stories. People sought animal wisdom to nourish their spirits as they hunted animal flesh to sustain their bodies. They resolved this paradox through propitiating animal spirits with elaborate,

precarious, ritualized strategies which would occupy half their waking and sleeping hours.

The Indian's oral tradition kept him mindful of his cosmic origins and religious duties. Enacting his mythology brought that tradition to life. Some ceremonies became, in essence, great theatrical visitations from that earlier realm, played out symbolically by entire communities. Whether his incantations originated from his own solitary vision-quests or were handed down as traditional chant, language helped tribal man woo spirit. When medicine men learned to throw themselves into a trance, they often acquired secret animal languages reminiscent of olden times; animal helpers taught them spells and songs to cure their patients.

Oral tradition often took place within a prescribed mixed-media setting. Costuming, animal-impersonation, floor painting, masking, mnemonic devices, song, incense, musical instruments, pilgrimage, hand gestures, dance, physical suffering, hallucinatory plants -- all could be chosen as part of the expressive choreography that would most effectively transport men back to the magical atmosphere when their fate was in their own hands.

Oral tradition filled many different needs and came in various forms. Tribes collectively celebrated their group lineage from animal ancestors. Each time an individual opened a medicine bundle containing talismans of his visionary experience he celebrated his personal oral tradition. If potent enough, it could become part of his people's inventory of legends. Everybody practised storytelling: winter night raconteurs, hunters and warriors, shamans, priests of high ritual dramas, parents. Through stories of demi-god heroes and anti-heroes, trickster figures and witches, the young were instructed in social behavior, kinship relations, tradition and taboo. When chronicles of tribal meanderings were passed on, they were moral lessons as well. A tribe's well-being rested on the continuity of its institutions. Objectivity was irrelevant in this form of history. They sang and told stories about what they valued.

Its intrinsic risk factor lent an immediacy to oral tradition. It was transmitted face-to-face like a relay race. Oral tradition was always one generation away from extinction. Though the 'storyline' would remain fixed, literary embellishment was encouraged. The only quality-control factor for myth recitations, songs, chants was whether their present form worked. Indians were ingenious at adorning their oral tradition with all manner of sympathetic, hypnotic, repetitious, and onomatopoeitic phrases and imagery to insure that they did.

Like a giant conduit of cultural continuity, oral tradition transmitted its restorative messages from the people to the forces around them and back again. As moral guardians of the tribal universe, medicine men and storytellers worked hand in hand. As their healing words assuaged everyone's nostalgia for paradise, the lines between them and audience blurred. The collective voice of the tribe was telling its people who they most truly were.

### III

Then, from beyond the rim of Turtle Mountain, a new human being appeared, and up to the present day, the rest is written history. Europeans launched one of mankind's most prolonged efforts by one culture to obliterate another. The white man considered his own civilization a step above the Indian's culture. Among his imports was the printed page. The oral tradition which had ensured cultural continuity now confronted an impressive competitor. Literacy would introduce a screen between second generation tribal man and the post-contact Indian. Everywhere Indians recognized writing as one of the white man's greatest medicines.

Transferring thoughts from memory to script seemed to suggest that the risk factor in oral tradition could be eliminated. Yet when white diplomats tried to revise "outdated" treaties Indians learned that print was not so permanent, and the diplomats themselves ran up against two strengths of oral tradition. It developed keen memories. The native leaders demonstrated a disturbing ability to recall the precise wording of the old treaties that had vowed -- on paper -- to keep their

promises forever. Secondly, Indians had considered treaties more as moral oaths than legal documents. Why should written words lack the enduring sanctity of spoken ones? Wasn't the 'power' that was the peril and purpose of utterance still in force when words were used for promise-making as well as for spell-binding? What the Indians did not realize yet was that the white man's genius for specialization had infiltrated his uses of language. Poets manipulated it to bring readers to tears. Historians wrote 'objectively' to build constructs of 'true' facts. Legalists and politicians used it in a paper game of persuasion and deception with little bearing on truth. When treaty-makers' consciences were pricked by Indians insisting that mutually agreed, written promises had no age limit, they could only say apologetically, "That was then, now is now."

Unlike oral tradition, print was marked by the impersonality of its transmission. Whereas oral tradition saw two or more gather together in the name of communication and interaction, written words allowed the scholar to spend his life in archives without human contact, or the newspaper reader in the subway to share no news with the riders beside him. Print helped to make the white man as alienated as an old Indian once described him, "you are each a one-man tribe."

Nor were there any traditions or taboos to protect print from misuse. Once information was set in print, no consensus governed its moral application. The white man might try regulating it, but print was too promiscuous. Manipulative uses of language flowered. Before long the world would be so inundated with suspicious, coercive words that decent folk would shrink from their daily bombardment.

Print also sapped words of their magical potency as it turned the esoteric into the public. Free speech and equality of different viewpoints was not the creed of small-community tribal man. Indeed, the Indian came to realize that the white man premised his worldview on the wordy constructs of his intellect. As Chief Moiese

of the Flathead contrasted their separate realities, "Before the Black Robes came and we lived in this valley, each year we used to choose a boy and send him to the top of the mountain and he fasted there and made medicine for the people. Then he came back and we were well. That was all the studying we had to do then. . . The valley was our home. If we had not learned to think, we would not have been driven out."

For native peoples literacy pushed paradise further into the past. The white man frowned on his mythologies and the ceremonies that enacted them. As Indians were diseased, killed, exiled, and relocated, their beliefs were insulted, the rituals which reunited them with animal-spirits were outlawed. What might be called a nostalgia for "the nostalgia for paradise" then began overwhelming many of the survivors, creating a host of adaptive religions: the Handsome Lake movement, the Ghost Dance, the Native American Church, the Indian Shakers. The era when animals and men were brothers was kept alive only among those tribal enclaves whose ceremonial chambers had the thickest walls. For many, it receded beyond recovery. The contemporary Pawnee/Oto poet, Anna Lee Walters, writes, "Before the Grandfathers ruled is a space in time we never speak of. We know nothing of it. We should not flatter or shame ourselves by pretending to know what we do not."

Word magic was now made by rhetoric or factual accumulation. Replacing the belief that words spoken in right order, repeated according to magic formulae, accompanied by painting and song, could literally alter events, was the faith in them to entertain, persuade, argue, and manipulate. Even traditional Indian oral tradition was not exempt from being turned into Literature to meet the insatiable appetite for written material. Adaptor of Indian song and liturgy, William Brandon confesses in his Magic World, a collection of rewritten Indian songs and poems, "In the buffalo songs, for instance, it would not only be

wearisome to follow faithfully all the magic numbers, but we might also, who knows, materialize a buffalo. We don't really want the buffalo. We only want the feeling of earnest repetition, the feeling of hypnosis, of the marvellous emerging, the feeling of the magic. All that we want from any of it is the feeling of its poetry. Let the ethnologists keep the rest." A fine division of the spoils for ethnologists and readers of poetry, but where does it leave the modern-day inheritors of Indian oral tradition?

#### IV

Survival has always been an Indian speciality; they adapted whatever materials were available to satisfy their needs. After the Cherokee encountered print, a remarkable man named George Guess, popularly known as Sequoyah, created a Cherokee alphabet. What is interesting is that the tribe first applied this invention to preserving traditional Cherokee spells. The shamans who learned Sequoyah's script wrote magic books, then hid them in tree trunks and attics to prevent exploitation.

Post-contact Indians have tried to absorb written language into tribal catalog just as they have taken on the pickup truck and the chain saw. A growing band of gifted Indian writers are striving to safeguard the moral and spiritual purpose of oral tradition during its conversion to an alien form. The theme which seems to preoccupy all of them is psychic renewal. The traditional respect for storytelling as a curative art form which can bring about renewal represents a phenomenon in contemporary American literature.

The conversion from spoken story to written literature has its problems, as Laguna Pueblo novelist and poet Leslie Silko seems well aware. In a recent interview she admitted, "One of my frustrations in writing, you know, is that unless you're involved in this, in these stories, in this place (Laguna), you as a reader might not get it. I have constantly to fight against putting in detail and things that would be too tedious for the 'outsider.' At the same time

I have to have some sort of internal integrity there in the piece. . . In describing places and directions, there are stories that identify the place. These kinds of things make condensing a problem. It all depends on how much you want to make the stories acceptable to communities outside this one. I condense, but I try to be very careful to preserve the essential quality that stories have that makes them stories. If that is out, then you've ruined the whole thing."

Perhaps because he is principally a poet, Simon Ortiz of Acoma does not seem to find any contradiction between Indian song and written poetry. When he articulates the creative process he could be describing the traditional Indian visionary beseeching spirits for aid: "the poet is complementary to whatever the source is, the source giving him the energy, the source providing him the substance or content, for what he is saying. The poem is complementary to that which is outside and away from you. Then you together have that single voice."

The first American Indian novel to gain nationwide acclaim was N. Scott Momaday's 1969 Pulitzer-Prize House Made of Dawn. It is a powerful story of a modern Indian's struggle for spiritual balance. Abel, part-Jemez Pueblo, has recently returned from the horrors of World War II, an experience which traumatized many Native Americans. He becomes a basket case in Los Angeles. A skid-row Indian revivalist, Tosamah, lectures to Indian castoffs how the white man "talks about the Word. He talks through it and around it. He builds upon it with syllables, with prefixes and suffixes and hyphens and accents. He adds and divides and multiplies the Word. And in all of this he subtracts the Truth. . . And in his presence, here on his own ground, you are as children, mere babes in the woods. You must not mind, for in this you have certain advantages. A child can listen and learn. The Word is sacred to a child." Tosamah lets Momaday make such contrasts between written literature and oral tradition. Eventually Abel rejects the destructive bitterness of Tosamah's articulate insights. Along with his bitter

tales, Tosomah has also told of his own pilgrimage to his Kiowa roots. This tale hands Abel the possibility for his salvation. He returns to the piñon landscape of his birth. After Abel buries the grandfather who raised him the novel closes with a ritual race for good harvest and hunting, for reintegration. Abel is running, breathlessly chanting, toward a traditional Indian resolution. Momaday's recent autobiographical The Names employs the pilgrimage far more personally as a medium for self-restoration.

The superb novel of modern life on the high Montana plains, Winter in the Blood, by James Welch, has no apparent resolution for its unnamed hero's alienation. But at the heart of the novel is a gem of oral history. Amidst his aimless bar-hopping, the existential hero first tells us of his grandmother's 19th century life - the only resurrection of traditional Indianness in the bleak book. Before the story ends the hero learns new facts about her from an old blind man who was her secret lover for twenty years. The novel's last sentence has the narrator throw the grandmother's old tobacco pouch into her grave. This can be seen as closing the door on dead tradition. But the novel is held together by this one account of a meaningful human connection conducted secretly beneath the white man's eyes, and oral tradition told it to us. The pouch in the grave has the heightened impact of haiku imagery; it can be saying that such tenuous continuity and respect is all that makes life worthwhile.

Leslie Silko's recent novel Ceremony makes no secret of its celebration of the mind-and-body restorative powers of oral tradition. Indeed, it is both a dramatization and lecture on that theme. Like Momaday's Abel, Silko's Tayo is a Pueblo World War II vet on the skids. His recovery calls for new ritual forms served up by an iconoclastic Navajo healer, Old Betonie. Old Betonie could be talking as much about oral tradition as about ritual when he argues to Tayo, "at one time the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world

was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong." Silko believes the same holds true for storytelling. As she says of Ceremony, "This novel is essentially about the powers inherent in the process of storytelling. . . The chanting or telling of ancient stories to effect certain cures or protect from illness and harm have always been part of the Pueblo's curing ceremonies."

An abiding devotion to the traditional tribal past by Indian writers is no empty exercise in sentimentality. It is an extremely urgent attempt to recover in print the function of oral tradition. Simon Ortiz is especially gifted at combining traditional Indian forms and modern American contexts. His eulogy to an Indian victim of modern times, "Beauty Roan Horse," is a masterpiece of spiritual renewal. As the chanted refrain builds in our ears, we are drawn together to the graveside of a man dead from alcohol and reservation hardship. While social outrage is here, our feelings move beyond. As Ortiz sings out for blessings upon this man's spirit, we look around at what we share with him. We find the world's wholeness strengthening as we appeal to it. We discover ourselves participating in a prayer.

Peter Nabokov

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Alice Marriott & Carol Rachlin. Dance Around the Sun (New York: Crowell, 1977) xiv+pp226. Hb.\$12.95. Bibliog.

Dance Around the Sun is a moving, personal account of the efforts of a Southern Cheyenne woman to establish her own identity by exploring both the traditional Indian world of her mother and the white world of the father she never knew. Mary Little Bear Inkanish was friend to, teacher of and informant for the authors, especially Marriott, for many years. Their account of her life focuses heavily on the experiences and understandings which they shared with her: they speak through

the book to their beloved "Mama."

"Mama" was not a typical Southern Cheyenne. She was vee-hay-kah, "White girl," whose halfbreed status distinguished her from her fellows; she was Mrs. Jim Inkanish, educated at the Colony School; and she was the first Indian woman to own her own home in Anadarko, where she and her Caddo husband lived and worked. She was a recognized craftswoman who travelled widely throughout the States, developing close associations with non-Indians as well as with Indians of other tribes. She differed quite considerably, then, from most of her Southern Cheyenne contemporaries as well as from the young woman of Truman Michelson's narrative, the only other published account focusing on the life history of a Southern Cheyenne woman.

The special circumstances of Mary's life make the lack of historical and ethnographic contextualization unfortunate. Where an effort is made to provide ethnographic background, it tends to be inadequate or erroneous. "This book is based principally on Mama's memory," warn the authors, and "if history or fact be belied, so let them" (p. viii). And indeed a statement such as "The Cheyennes traced their descent through their mothers, but a child's name was at least supposed to indicate the identification of the father's clan" (pp. 4-5) certainly belies fact. Cheyennes, like most nomadic groups of the High Plains, traced descent bilaterally and did not have clans (though Grinnell consistently mistakes matrilineal extended families and bands for clans). Other customs remembered and described in the early chapters are also suspect; the suggestion that sleeping an infant to quiet it was commonplace, for example, or that joking between a man and his sister-in-law was appropriate only once a year. More commonly, however, one finds that relevant data is simply not provided. The whole problem Mary has about her uncle's medicine bundle, for example, would make much more sense to the reader if he were enlightened with respect to the

proper treatment and transmission of such bundles. The meaning and motivation of Mary's own behaviour is obscured by lack of contextualization.

Craftwork and the Sun Dance occupy the cultural focus of the study. Beadwork and tanning are appropriately represented as highly valued skills among Plains Indian women, skills which became increasingly important as white society came to take commercial notice of them and whole families might be supported by the income from beadwork. The "crafts movement" was of importance in granting much needed acclaim to traditional crafts and craftsmen and providing financial and institutional support for them. One result, however, was an exaggerated emphasis on material products and techniques as distinct from their wider cultural context. A similar emphasis is evident in this biography, due probably to Marriott's own deep commitment to support and study of Indian arts and crafts.

The Sun Dance, of which there are some unusual photos by Rachlin, represents a cultural conflict "Mama" experienced. She grows up respecting the ceremony and those involved in it, indeed, preparing for it with relatives and feeling its power, albeit from a distance. But when she learns that her mother will "give her body" as the Sacred Woman and that her sacrifice will entail what Mary has learned to define as incestuous and sinful sexual unions, Mary runs away in shame and confusion. She goes to live at the Segers' school and severs most of her contact with her home. She is eventually reconciled with her mother, though not with her role in the Sun Dance. In the final chapters, the "last Sun Dance" symbolizes the return to a strong interest in and respect for traditional Indian things typical of Mary's later years.

Beadwork and the Sun Dance are singled out in this account as primary symbols of Southern Cheyenne culture. But neither is specifically Cheyenne (despite tribally specific variations of these generic Plains traits) and neither is adequately related to

other aspects of the culture. There is no real discussion of sodalities in Southern Cheyenne society, although the Women's Heart Club, a beading society, is represented as a contemporary revival of such traditional groups. There is, quite surprisingly, no mention of the Sacred Arrows, the ceremony of their renewal, or of their relation to the Sacred Hat and the Sun Dance in Cheyenne tradition. Perhaps Mary, like the authors, came to focus on beadwork and the Sun Dance as the basis of her Indian-ness: perhaps these are more the focus of her relation with the authors than of her own identity. The text does not allow us to decide.

"You won't regret this, I promise," comforted Mrs. Seger when Mary ran away to the school. "It's better to know two ways of living than just one." Mary Little Bear Inkanish came to know more than two ways of living, although she did not participate in the mainstream of any: besides the Southern Cheyenne way of her mother and the rural white way of her trader-father, there was the Cadöo way of her husband and the pan-Indian way encouraged by her participation in the crafts movement. Mary is represented as a contemporary human, not some remnant of the noble or ignoble savage, a projection of European world-view upon another time and place. If her story de-emphasizes the cultural integrity of her people, it underlines the individuality of its participants and their various adaptations to the bi-cultural situation. If it is an inadequate ethnographic account, it is a valuable personal testimony to the spirit and strength of one Indian woman.

Works referred to: George B. Grinnell, The Cheyenne Indians: Their History and Ways of Life, 2 vols. New York: Cooper Square, 1962; Truman Michelson, Narrative of a Southern Cheyenne Woman, Smithsonian Misc. Collections, Vol 87, no. 5, 1932, pp. 1-13

Terry Straus -Univ of Chicago

I Am The Fire of Time: The Voices of Native American Women, ed. Jane B. Katz. New York: Button, 1977 \$6.95pb.

Recent anthologies of Native American literature have become the most popular means for publishers to cope with a new, commercially uncertain field. I Am the Fire of Time is billed as "the first collection of writings by Native American women." Katz has collected from many sources a varied group of writings intended to give "fragments of a people's experience, a kaleidoscope of their customs and mores" (p.xvi). Katz tries to span women's experiences from cradleboard to grave and from coast to coast in only 193 pages. The first section, "From The Tribal World" is taken primarily from oral history narratives and anthropological collections. These 43 short pieces, from two lines to four pages, all give the impression that reservation life is over, that the past is a golden age to which there is no return, and catch Native American women at the high points of birth, marriage, death: one has the impression that otherwise not much happened in their lives.

The second section, "Voices of Today" does better justice to women and writing and includes the only sustained pieces, "Chee's Daughter" by Platero and Miller, and "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" by Silko, both stories of fine literary quality, though neither has a specifically woman-oriented theme. Katz' purpose was, in part, to "believe the popular stereotype of the native woman as a beast of burden." But the bits of oral history and narrative she has chosen for Part I suggest that native women did less and were less than her editorial notes maintain. The powerful role that native women played (and play) in a number of tribes is not made clear. And native women do have a history other than that of children, family, and home. Mountain Wolf Woman, for example, is quoted several times in Part I on coming of age and peyote; in her autobiography there is a great deal more. Section II has more value in part because it includes views and writings of native activist women, whom no one could mistake for beasts of burden.

Katz has done a creditable job, but maybe a job she shouldn't have chosen. In 193 pages one can hardly do more than mention the names of many tribes and traditions.

We've come a long way from Spiller's Literary History of the United States, in which we learn that "the literary history of the nation began when the first settler from abroad of sensitive mind paused in his adventure long enough to feel that he was under a different sky, breathing new air, and that a New World was all before him with only his strength and providence for guides." There is need for anthologies of Native American writing, especially by women. This collection may lead the way for other, more useful ones. Patricia A. D'Andrea, Ed. La Confluencia

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The Tale of the Nisan Shamaness, A Manchu Folk Epic, Margaret Nowak and Stephen Durran, Univ. of Washington Press, 1977, \$8.95hb. pp. 182. Good edition of a famous shaman tale from Northeast Asia with a discussion of shamanism and theories about it. This, plus the intrinsic interest of the tale, will be most attractive to ACAIL readers.

Four Rock Art Studies, ed. C. Wm. Clewlow, Jr, is the first in a series of North American Rock Art studies to be published by the Ballena Press, Box 1366, Socorro, NM, 87801. It consists of four monographs, primarily anthropological, and is a reliable starting place for those intrigued by rock art but baffled by the nonsense written about it. At \$5.95hb. this volume is a bargain with its maps and illustrations (part of one below). The Ballena Press produces inexpensive but excellent editions of important ethnographic work.

