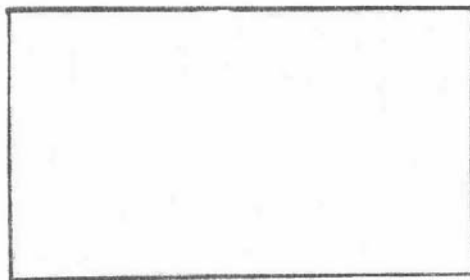


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A STRANGER IN MY OWN LIFE:
ALIENATION IN NATIVE AMERICAN PROSE AND POETRY (I)

One of the major themes in modern or individually written Native American literature is that of alienation or "otherness." This is in distinction to traditional literatures, one of the more attractive qualities of which is the almost total absence of a sense of "otherness." For the traditional peoples, togetherness or belonging was a central concern; even when one is banished, as in the story of Sweet Medicine, or of Deganiwideh, or, in more purely literary terms, as in that of the mythic twins who, though children of the sun, must seek their father's acknowledgement after he denies them, the banished is united once more into the tribe, usually bringing special gifts or knowledge to the people on return. The whole thrust of traditional narratives is toward wholeness. Kinship or relationship are major values, and those who are alien are so because they come from another people. This creates no conflict, for strangers are strangers, and the rules for dealings with strangers are clear in tribal traditions. It is when the tribal person is the stranger that internal conflict and the process of alienation occurs.

The ancient thrust toward unification with the people is not lost in modern Indian literature. But it is a painful urge, one that is beset by isolation, powerlessness, denial, pain and loss of self; it is one that is often worked out violently. Within longer works, the violence usually leads to some sense of unity within the person; in shorter works, especially poetry, it is often projected

Interested in submitting a 12-15pp. paper for "The Use of Oral Tradition in Contemporary Native American Literature" at Rocky Mountain MLA, Oct 1979? Write Galen Buller, Dept Indian Studies, Univ. North Dakota, Grand Forks ND 58202.

outward into a kind of revolutionary stance, as well as into an unbalanced sense of romanticism concerning Native American life, tradition, and history. The protagonist or speaker does not create actual unity with the people as a result of this stance, because the people are turned into a dream of faraway times and conditions. What is articulated is a world that might have been or that might be, but not one that is. The process of creating an Indian world-that-is-not began with earliest contact; it continues in the present in the political, social, creative, religious and educational areas of modern Indian life in terms of conflict and, inevitably, alienation.

One of the major features of modern Native American writing is a preoccupation with this process of alienation. From the works of N. Scott Momaday to the most recently published poems of Indian poets, alienation is a continuing theme and process. Handled symbolically or directly, it forms the basic structure and tone of a preponderance of creative works. The theme, finally treated directly in Leslie Silko's novel Ceremony, in which it directly shapes the character of Tayo and his destiny, can be seen as well in poems of James Welch, Simon J. Ortiz, Wendy Rose, Nila NorthSun, Marnie Walsh, Maurice Kenny, and most of the Native American poets appearing in such popular anthologies as The American Indian Speaks (1969), The Belly of the Shark (1973), Voices From Wah'Kon-tah (1974), and Carriers of the Dream-Wheel (1975). The structures which bi-culturalism have generated infrom Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's Then Badger Said This.

Alienation, as a theme, is more than a literary device in these works. It is an articulation of a basic experience, one that is characteristic of the life and consciousness of the half-breed. That it

becomes theme, symbol, character, plot and overt structure of Native American writing, that it seeps through on every level of that writing, is testament, I think, to the depth and intensity of its pervasive presence in the writers' consciousness and lives. It is a primary experience of all bi-culturated Indians in the United States.

Of the fifty entries in The American Indian Speaks that can be classed as imaginative writing, thirty-six deal in some way with alienation. 27 of 46 poems in From the Belly of the Shark deal with the theme. The same concentration on alienation is found in other anthologies. Aside from the historical reasons I've discussed, the pre-occupation with alienation, in its classic dimension of isolation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, lowered self-esteem accompanied by pervasive anxiety, a hopelessness and a sense of victimization, may be so strong because the writers are predominantly breeds themselves. Exactly what this means in terms of the writer's articulation of personal experience is necessarily a central concern of criticism of Native writing.

What is the experience that creates this sense of alienation? The breed is an Indian who is not an Indian. Breeds are a bit of both worlds, and the consciousness of this makes them seem alien to Indians while making them feel alien among whites. In the Indian world there is a classification of individuals according to "indianness." No one is exactly sure what the qualifying characteristics are, nor is that to the point. What is to the point is the necessity this classification imposes on individuals to conform, often without exactly knowing what the qualifying standards are or how conformance can be signalled.

Nor is it clear whether standards on-reservation are more or less stringent than those applied in

urban areas, or whether traditional, full-blood Indian people make the same kinds of demands for 'purity' which partial-bloods or acculturated full-bloods make. What is very clear is that belonging is precariously dependent on vague norms of others, or on clear (but unmeetable) standards declared by tribes, individuals, or the United States government. The pervasive sense of uneasiness, of having been shut-out or disenfranchised, of anger at circumstances which result in overt or covert alienation from the basic source of one's consciousness informs the greater body of Native American writing, though its expression is more often disguised than treated explicitly.

One of the more profound examples of this expression is a poem by Maurice Kenny, "Monahsetah. . . A Cheyenne Girl," which deals with the relation of Monahsetah and Custer, who is said to have fathered her child. The tone is anger and grief, and a kind of puzzlement at her betrayal of her people:

Driven by Long Hair to feel out the ashes of
the villages,
Scout out the vital hearts of your people. . . .
Where did you find the love to mount his cot,
knifeless,
Or did he find your flesh upon his earthen floor!

Custer strutted your grave to glory, foolish girl!¹

A commonly occurring theme: references to historical encounters which resulted in the loss of homelands, of sovereignty of unassailable identity -- a useful device, surely. Through the rendering of historical events, the anger and the loss can be treated with dignity, if not with equanimity. Another poem of Kenny's clarifies some of the source of anger:

Going Home to the Mohawk Nation

The book lay unread in my lap
snow gathered at the window
from Brooklyn it was a long ride

the bus followed the plow
from Syracuse to Watertown
to country cheese and maples
tired rivers and closed paper mills
home to gossipy aunts. . .
their dandelions and gooseberries
old dogs and pregnant cats. . .
home to cedars and fields of boulders
cold graves under willow and pine
Indian hill where once the Nation villaged
home from Brooklyn to the reservation
that was not home
to songs I could not sing
to dances I could not dance
from Brooklyn bars and ghettoed rats
to steaming horses stomping frozen earth
barns and privies lost in blizzards
home to a Nation, Mohawk
to faces I did not know
and hands which did not recognize me
to names and doors my father shut. (2)

This poem is one of the few written by a Native American which is explicit in argument. The idea is clear as the loss. The only other poem I have seen that is this explicit is by Nila NorthSun to her grandmother in her book Diet Pepsi and Nacho Cheese. Grandmother has complained that her grandchildren don't speak indian and there is no one near her to buy her tobacco. The poet replies:

but gramma
you told your daughters
marry white men
told them they would have
nicer houses
fancy cars
pretty clothes
could live in the city

gramma your daughters did
they couldn't speak indian anymore
how could we grandchildren learn
there are no rabbits to skin
in the city
we have no gramma there to
teach us the ways (3)

It is difficult to imagine a clearer example of normlessness than that expressed in these two poems. The individual is aware of norms, but in such a way that they are meaningless in the speaker's life. For what use is it to know, vaguely, that there are songs one might sing or dances that one might dance, when one does not know which dances, which songs; when one does not know the words or the steps, but must be taken, like a tourist, to see how the real people perform?

Tourism, or feelings of strangeness in a place that one believes should be familiar, is more commonly expressed, as in a poem by Jeff Saunders:

I came far today
from where the winds are white. . . .
We came circus
trying to crawl down streets.
I left. . . .
I felt like a tourist. (4)

or Simon J. Ortiz in "Toward Spider Springs":

Our baby, his mother,
and I were trying to find
the right road, . . .
We were trying to find
a place to start all over
but couldn't. (5)

The sense of being lost, of searching for direct experience of himself informs the book in which this poem appears. Titled Going for the Rain, the book traces the psychic and spiritual journey of a Pueblo who must, unlike his traditional ancestors

and parents, search for the rain. His search takes him all over America in search of Indians and landscapes he can admit into his consciousness. It takes him therefore through loneliness, bewilderment, estrangement, anger, powerlessness and leads him toward unification with the land and his people. What he misses is the acceptance of all the landscapes and of all the people -- so he is ultimately locked out of himself. He discovers that he must forever look for the rain, and not, as he wanted, forever know its being.

Other poets who are not fully at home in either world have less ease than Ortiz in pretending to discover balance through identifying as purely Indian. They express their anguish and anger more easily because of this. The revolutionary and sentimentally romantic poetry of the "new Indian" fills such publications as Akwesasne Notes and From the Belly of the Shark. Alienation is everywhere in evidence in these collections. The Indian is created as a victim of hostile and alien forces, excluded from America (where real life goes on), deprived of status and customs. The Indian is created helpless and defeated. The Americans (the rejected half of the real situation) are created as tyrants who have stolen the lands and meaning from the Indian's life. It is as though the writers believe that the pain of loss of a dreamed-of heritage can be assuaged by powerlessness; as if meaning can be created out of estrangement when that estrangement is given a tragic and immutable dimension. This may be so. But what is also created is a meaning that must carry pain as its primary message -- for that is the significance of tragedy.

Wendy Rose writes in "Grandfather Pipestone Soul"

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THEY'VE DONE?

What they have done to your family.

The ancestors would not like my name --

its christians that gave it to me.

We're in California now.

Grandfather, they even moved us. (6)

Betty Oliver in "The People Call for Justice" demands:

Where are the wampums of the Iroquois?
Locked in sterile glass
For sterile minds to view
While the home of the Delawares
Waits to disappear under the waters of Tocks
Where will our kindness stop?
When the last quiet man
Walks into Eternity? (7)

This haunting sense of powerlessness haunts one even on Indian lands, and the theme of loss, anger, and brutalization forms the basic body of the work of poets such as Nila NorthSun and Marnie Walsh. NorthSun writes of her cousin, the shadow:

shadow is	shadow didn't know
my cousin	what she was
shadow was	my cousin killed herself
my cousin	nothing new
hated herself	we have lots of cousins
because	both
others hated her	dead & alive
whites hated her	sometimes
indians hated her	both
called shadow	with the same shadow (8)
apple indian	
whites saw only INDIAN	
fat drunk greasy squaw	

With the same tone of understatement, the almost brutal flippancy of NorthSun, Walsh writes of aunt Nettie who went to Catholic school and then to college for a while, but when she came home "she got a baby/ but give it away." Aunt Nettie liked to talk about what she'd done in college. "She don't tell though why she come home/ nathan say she stole money/ and got throwed out. . ." Aunt Nettie liked to tell poetry she learned in college, "about love and some lady in a tower/ by a lake," and this love was to be her

undoing on the reservation:

when aunt nettie got too drunk
she told poetry
and oh she knowed it good
but all the people laughed
and she took to crying a lot
wouldn't eat
just drank whiskey all the time. . .
no mama to care and no papa to beat her
they dead and her alone

yesterday they find her
all crazy
screaming and naked
she say she lost
and cant find her tower
by the lake
some people take her away
but not her poetry
i stole it
and she won't miss it where she went (9)

Aunt and cousin, caught in the same ambiguity; unable to be Indian, unable not to be Indian, they go the same route: drunk, crazy, isolate, having no point of reference which they can persist in, which is meaningful to all their experience, they fail as the people also fail to resolve the dilemma or to transcend it.

(to be concluded in next number)

- (1) Maurice Kenny, "Monahsetah. . ." From the Belly of the Shark, ed. Walter Lowenfels (N.Y.: Vintage, 1973) p.35
(2) Maurice Kenny, "Going Home to the Mohawk Nation," unpublished, by permission of the author. (3) Nila NorthSun, "Teh Way and the way things are," Diet Pepsi and Nacho Cheese (Fallon, Nev: Duck Down Press, 1977) p.13 cf. Sun Tracks, 2:2, Fall, 1976, p.21. (4) Jeff Saunders, "I Came Far Today," Four Indian Poets, ed. John Milton (Vermillion, S.D: Dakota Press, 1974), p.61. (5) Simon

J. Ortiz, "Toward Spider Springs," Going for the Rain (NY: Harper&Row, 1976), p.25.(6) Wendy Rose (Chiron Khanshedel), "Grandfather Pipestone Soul," From the Belly of the Shark, p.36.(7) Betty Oliver, "The People Call for Justice," Belly of the Shark, p. 47.(8) Nila NorthSun, "my cousin the shadow," Diet Pepsi, p.35. (9) Marnie Walsh, "Vickie Loans-Arrow, 1971," A Taste of the Knife (Boise: Ahsahta Press, 1976) pp.10-11.

Paula Gunn Allen

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New America: A Review: Special Native American Issue, vol.2, no. 3, Summer-Fall, 1976, ed Gearld Hobson.

New America's special Native American Issue is one of the better collections of this sort in recent years. Guest editor Gearld Hobson (Cherokee-Chickasaw), who teaches English and Native American Literature at Univ. of New Mexico, has gathered some powerful works by poets, novelists, graphic artists, photographers, and literary critics, most of whom are based in the Four Corners regions. Almost all contributors are Native Americans.

As Hobson indicates in his introduction, the issue features "little concerning the past glories of Indian people. . .instead these writings are mirrors of the kind of world too often seen and lived by Indians today." This focus on contemporary Indian reality makes for a bitter pill at times, but one which provides necessary medicine for readers whose interest in Native literature hasn't passed the Noble Savage illusion. Works like "Gallup," chapter from a novel by Larry Emerson, and "Gallup, New Mexico -- Indian Capitol of the World," from Leslie Silko's excellent novel Ceremony, provide unforgettable glimpses of day-to-day indifference, exploitation, and despair not uncommon to the Indian Southwest. Silko writes:

I remember when we drove through Gallup. I saw Navajos in torn old jackers, standing outside the bars. There were Zunis and Hopis there too, even a few Lagunas. All of them slouched against the walls of the bars along Hiway 66, their eyes staring down at the

ground-like they had forgotten the sun in the sky; or maybe that was the way they dreamed for wine, looking for it somewhere in the mud on the sidewalk. This is us too, I was thinking to myself, these people crouching outside bars like cold flies stuck to the walls.

The writing in these pieces and in poems by Connie Z. Talley, Joseph Concha, Nia Francisco Mitchell, and James Hepworth is hardbitten, uncompromising, unsentimental. Yet the realism is vivid and vital, not cynical.

The issue offers some good poems by widely published poets like Norman Russell, Joseph Bruchac, Jim Barnes, Joy Harjo, and Paula Gunn Allen. It includes works by fourteen members of the "new generation" of Southwestern Native American writers, all born 1950-54, and most in contact with one another through workshops at the Univ. of New Mexico. Some of these promising writers, Hobson suggests, will be familiar names ten years from now. Hobson's introduction provides an interesting and incisive overview of the "cycles of interest" in Native American literature, and of key publications in the field since the turn of the century. For many, this essay alone will be worth the price of the magazine. Other worthwhile features include in-depth critical discussions of Welch's Winter in the Blood and D'Arcy McNickle's The Surrounded, interesting artwork by Lynn Beibel, Jim St. Martin, and Robert Nakaidimae, and a sequence of fine photographs of scenes and people from Laguna pueblo by Lee H. Marmon, Leslie Silko's father.

The issue is suitable for classes focussing on the literature and culture of the Southwest, and is available from the Department of American Studies, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, N.M. 87131. A year's subscription (3 issues) is a bargain at \$4.00.

Michael Castro

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Simon J. Ortiz. Howbah Indians. Tucson:Blue Moon Press, 1978. ppiv+42. \$3.95 pb.

Let me clear one thing up right away: the title of this book refers not to a sub-group of Pueblos but to

a huge sign which a man named Eagle put up at the Whiting brothers gas station he managed: WELCOME HOWBAH INDIANS. "Howbah" means something like "you all," and the sign was an invitation to Eagle's fellow Indians to come in and buy gas. As the title story of a collection of four by Simon J. Ortiz, "Howbah Indians" means "Y'all Indians."

The title is appropriate, for the Indians who populate the little world of this book are down-home Indians: a Korean War veteran who is found dead in a wash one morning, his face bruised (no one ever finds out why); a girl who goes off with a silver dollar given her by her grandfather to take a job at a dormitory in the Keams Canyon school; and old man puzzled and amused and frightened by what he sees on the TV set given him on Father's Day, his grandson trying to explain why the men on the screen are digging rocks on the surface of the moon; a one-legged World War II veteran who runs for the hills after he murders his employer with his crutch and his nine-year-old son who decides he must follow him as he escape an angry mob of white men.

Ortiz writes with grace and self-assurance. By reading his fiction we come a little closer to understanding the facts of Indian life which this young Acoma poet and storyteller knows. Ortiz is especially good at conveying Indian peace in the midst of poverty, loneliness in the midst of community, and puzzlement in the midst of explanation. He is to be commended for not overstating the antiwhiteman theme potential in all writings by and about Indians. In "Something's Going On," the best of the four stories, the man Willie is victimized by both white and Indian cops. His own people are as reluctant to help him as the white mob is to punish him. And Ortiz makes it clear that, whatever the extenuating circumstances, Willie did commit a brutal murder.

Perhaps it is unfortunate that America takes its writers seriously only if they can produce a novel. But here the demand may not be bad. Ortiz writes fine fiction. It is finest when it is sustained. The three-page "Home Country" is inferior to the twenty-page "Something's Going On." The first leaves us wondering what went on. The second leaves us knowing what went on, and curious about what will happen to Willie and Jimmo next. It reads like the first chapter of a novel. To judge from this slender volume, Ortiz is eminently capable of writing that novel. I hope he will.

Peter G. Beidler Lehigh University

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Rosamond M. Vanderburgh. I Am Nokomis, Too: The Biography of Verna Patronella. Don Mills, Ontario. General Publishing Co. 1977 pp ii +247. \$6.95pb.

In this abbreviation of her life adventures, Nokomis Johnston reveals one woman's thought and behavioral adaptations within the confines of two cultures, both characterized by internal ambivalency. Although it is obvious that many stressful circumstances must have been eliminated from the published account, it is much to the credit of Verna Patronella Nadjwon Johnston that she has been able openly to share so much of her experience. Thus she has indeed become grandmother to an uncountable number of both Anishinaubeg and White Eyes. R. M. Vanderburgh, the recorder for Grandmother Verna, assures us that it is mere coincidence that the recording has been made by an anthropologist. But the types of material which have been recorded and the interpretations, both direct and implied, reveal the skilled hand of a trained anthropological observer. This is no discredit to the volume; rather it enhances its value by enabling the reader to apply the experience to his own time and circumstances.

Readers who have experienced the careful diplomacy of Mrs. Johnston's relative, Basil Johnston, in his Ojibway

Heritage (N.Y.:Columbia Univ, 1976), will be first astonished, then concerned and finally grateful for the frankness with which she speaks. There is a quality here some of us have equated with the "straight tongue" of the American native before the time of Indian urbanity.

The closing of this volume is much like the closing of one of the enigmatic ancient learning tales, one of those in which one wonders if the storyteller himself knows the moral it is intended to portray. Undoubtedly this feeling arises because Grandmother Verna's life force strongly continues, and because one never does know the influences of one's actions.

R.M. Vanderburgh in part three, entitled "Reflections," changes subjective narrative into an objective one. She uses Mandelbaum's concepts of Dimension, Turning, and Means of Adaptation to provide focus. She sees Verna Johnston as an emerging "culture broker": one who interprets and disseminates "Indian things" to Indians who have lost their Indian identity. The faith of Grandmother Johnston in those "Indian things" to answer problems of all people today brings with some satisfactory semblance of conclusion. To every native of North America Nokomis, Too will bring a renewal of painful concern; we can hope that it will do the same for members of the dominant white society. Certainly one would wish the message of Nokomis into the mind and heart of each woman who finds herself in the position of ambiguous marginality.

Keewaydinoquay (Ms. Peschel) (Anishinaubikwe)
(Reviews of Basil Johnston's book and the Vastokas' Sacred Art of the Algonkians plus Dewdney's Sacred Scrolls by Keewaydinoquay will appear in future numbers)

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Two Hopi Song Poets of Shungopavi: Milland Lomakema and Mark Lomayestewa, ed. Michael Kabotie. Box 235, Oraibi, AZ 86039. \$2.00 Pb.

Hopi poet Michael Kabotie has edited this book of Hopi song/poems, composed for use in Hopi ceremonies.

and are here presented in side-by-side Hopi and English versions. The book is thus one of the few available bilingual editions of Hopi ceremonial poetry. The poems are mainly Kachina Songs, addressed to the Kachina spirits who dwell in the San Francisco Mountains and control the rain so vital to the Hopi way of life. The writing of both is lean, clear, and imbued with the radiance of the sun over the Hopi mesas. A book of interest to anyone attracted to the Hopi way.

Mistah. Lance Henson. Strawberry Press, 11 Broadway, N.Y., N.Y. 10004. 1977. \$1.50 #2 of chapbooks from this press run by Maurice Kenny.

These spare poems by a Cheyenne poet are dominated by images of silence, emptiness, and light. The effect is evocative, an opening of vision into clear space and radiance where we are sensitized to the sacredness and magic of minute particulars of everyday life:

slow inter leaves tap against
the window

flowers curl inward
toward the solitary light
of a dream

In these poems awareness of slow, small processes of nature illumine our inner mysteries:

face grown inward
a stone over which water
has passed many
years

climbing into evening
I am
bone
chipped
by
light

Michael Castro

Harper and Row has published the late D'Arcy McNickle's Wind From an Enemy Sky, in theme and style following the pattern of his superb The Surrounded of forty years ago. Few have dramatized as compellingly the tragedy of modern Indians and no Native American has written so compassionately as McNickle of the whites who destroy and degrade Indian life. This novel is the testament of a remarkable human being. (A full review will appear in a later number.)