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A STRANGER IN MY OWN LIFE

ALIENATION IN NATIVE AMERICAN PROSE AND POETRY: II

The crucial factor in alienation is the unconscious assumption that one must ally with one segment of one's experience and not with another; the world is seen in terms of antagonistic principles, so that good is set against bad, Indian against "white," and tradition against modernism; personal significance becomes lost in a confusion of dualities. For many, this process has meant rejection of Indianism. The "apple," the person who categorically rejects the Indian culture he was born to, chooses one side, the white. The personal war waged by those who choose to perceive themselves as thoroughly westernized is often worked out in bouts of suicidal depression, alcoholism, abandonment of Indian ways, and a frequently verbalized distrust of and contempt for "long hairs."

Others, aware that one cannot reject one's Indianness, either because winds of fashion and politics have so convinced them or because they are aware that such action is impossible in actuality, choose the course of self-rejection. These often work out their conflict in terms of rage directed against whites and "apples." Their violence tends to be other directed, homicidal rather than suicidal. They also take on the dress of Indians, generally a mass-culture stereotype, and long for the old times when the buffalo roamed and Indians were free to pursue their ancient ways, unmolested and unquestioned by the hated stranger, the unfathomable whiteman. James Welch describes this process in his moving "Winter Indian":

Happy to think of good times,  
buffalo fat to fall in jumps.  
When war was still a game and berries  
stained a face fierce,  
white women slaved to laughing squaws. (10)

Unlike many who write about the past with longing, Welch sees the terms of the conflict, and in his anger or grief finds strength and wit for honesty. He deals again with this theme in "Blackfeet, Blood and Piegan Hunters":

If we raced a century over hills  
that ended years before, people couldn't  
say our run was simply poverty of promise  
for a better end. We ended sometime  
back in recollections of glory, myths  
that meant the hunters meant a lot  
to starving wives and bad painters. . . .

Comfortable we drink and string together stories  
of white buffalo, medicine men who promised  
and delivered horrible cures for hunger,  
the lovely tales of war and white men massacres.  
Meaning gone, we dance for pennies now,  
our feet jangling dust that hides the bones  
of sainted Indians. . . . (11)

But for many writers and activists unity is sought in humorless repudiation of the experiences that form a large part of their lives. In the attempt to integrate a fragmented personality, they choose violent rejection of what is western (in their terms) and cling to dreams of lost glory, lost traditions, lost languages. The attempt is bound to fail, of course: their mode is itself western, after all, the political activism itself, and the act of writing, are results of westernization. The old Indians may have made war; they did not hold rallies. The problem faced by the "new Indians" is in realizing that two halves makes a whole, and a half-breed cannot be wholly white or wholly Indian, but must balance carefully the two in recognition of the good and evil in both, in terms of personal significance. Autonomy rests, finally, in the individual, not in the history, and not in a two-dimensional view of culture.

Scott Momaday has said that "an Indian is an idea which a given (person) has of himself." He believes that this is "a moral idea," explaining how people react to other individuals and the world in general.(12) And as this is true for the Indian, it is true for the half-breed; a half-breed is an idea which people have of themselves. Tayo in Ceremony believes himself to be strange, separate. He and Auntie know that he is to be kept at a distance, because of his light hair and his hazel eyes, and because he is different.(13) Worse, he must be separate because he lives (68-70).

But this idea goes even further: he believes that he must erase this distance, and he tries in various ways. As a child he simply accepts it. He weeps for his mother, and then for her picture, but he accepts Auntie's belief that it has to be that way, and feels excited when she makes a point of his separation: "He never forget the strange excitement he felt when she looked at him that way, and called him aside"(69). On this occasion, Auntie explains to him the reason for his distance; she tells him a story about his mother, naked on a river bank. 'Nobody will ever tell you this,' she said, 'but you must hear it so you will understand why things are this way.' She was referring to the distance she kept between him and herself (69).

But the anguish that distance creates is too much for him. Tayo had planned to be the one who stayed home and helped Josiah(73); he landed in the Phillipines with his cousin-brother Rocky instead. And, as though the physical distance coupled with the psychological distance was too heavy a load, he collapsed time and space, perceiving the Japanese soldiers as relatives and boarding school friends. That had become the worst thing for Tayo: they looked too familiar even when they were alive. . . .When the sergeant told them to kill all the Japanese soldiers lined up in front of the cave. . . .Tayo could not pull the trigger. . . .in that instant he saw Josiah standing there; . . .and he watched his uncle fall, and he knew it was Josiah. (7, cf.44,124)

Rocky dead with Josiah, and Tayo alone, he tries to separate entirely from the reality he is unable to deal with. Invisible, Tayo is so distant from his own being that he refers to himself in the third person. He inhabited a gray winter fog on a distant elk mountain where hunters are lost indefinitely and their own bones mark the boundaries.

The new doctor asked him if he had ever been visible, and Tayo spoke to him softly and said that he was sorry but no one was allowed to speak to an invisible one. . . . The sun was dissolving the fog, and one day Tayo heard a voice answering the doctor. The voice was saying, 'He can't talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound.' (15)

Home once again, Tayo tries another strategy: he admits to his situation, tries to use it for understanding, tries to use the distances and separation as a bridge between those who have been destroyed and those who are being destroyed: "I'm a half-breed. I'll be the first one to say it. I'll speak for both sides." (112) This stratagem fails as the others have, and for the same reason: he believes that someone is wrong, if not the Indian, then the white. And his enemy understands this essential error and exploits it: 'There he is. He thinks he's something all right. Because he's part white. Don't you, half-breed?'. . .

Tayo sat down. He knew Emo meant what he said; Emo had hated him since the time they had been in grade school together, and the only reason for this hate was that Tayo was part white. But Tayo was used to it by now. Since he could remember, he had known Auntie's shame for what his mother had done, and Auntie's shame for him. (57)

But Tayo's misunderstanding is to be his eventual salvation. When he tells himself that he is strange, he admits a possibility which will serve him in the end. When he can openly admit to being a half-breed, he creates the beginning of his return to wholeness. When he can admit to his violence, his murderous intensity, he creates the possibility of refusing to

murder later, when his survival and that of all the people depend on his decision. Emo is both murderer and victim. He is the murderous impulse that Tayo tries to suppress in himself. Tayo tells old Ku'oosh, "I'm sick, but I never killed any enemy." (36)

But he is uncertain of his innocence. He might be guilty. And he is sure of his guilt, because he feels that he was responsible for Rocky's death and for Josiah's death. His sense of guilt is so great that he even believes himself to be responsible for the death of the land. But he does not not admit that to the old medicine man directly. Instead, he says, "Maybe you could help me anyway. Do something for me, the way you did for the others who came back. Because what if I didn't know I killed one?" (36)

The tangle begins to straighten out in Tayo's mind when he encounters Betonie. Tayo is suspicious of the man at first, because Betonie is creatively and openly a breed: he exists in both worlds, Indian and white, and understands them from within a wholistic scheme. Betonie's story allows all the ingredients of Tayo's mind to reform themselves into a coherent pattern, just as Betonie's willingness to let Tayo speak of his doubts and misunderstandings allows Tayo sufficient space to recreate himself. Old Ku'oosh had told Tayo that the world is fragile, (35) and Tayo was well aware that "it took a great deal of energy to be a human being." (28)

What Tayo didn't understand was the limits of witchcraft. He didn't understand the limits of human beings, or of politics. He did not understand the limits of hatred either. And he did not understand that the old ways were not what he believed them to be, that they were riddled with superstition, anger, misunderstanding, and the kind of pain that human beings inflict on one another for no reason other than that they are human beings. (99-100) But Betonie told him these things, and showed them to him; he allowed Tayo the understanding that the old magic still exists, for people -- not for "Indians" alone,

but for those who with belief in the power of life are willing to open themselves to it.

'Look,' Betonie said, pointing east to Mount Taylor towering dark blue with the last twilight. 'They only fool themselves when they think it is theirs. The deeds and papers don't mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountain. (128)

At first, Tayo can't bring himself to accept the old man or his words: "I wonder sometimes. . .because my mother went with white men." (128) But Betonie knows what Tayo is up to, and simply points out that the situation is not an either-or proposition: "Nothing is that simple. . .you don't write off all the white people, just like you don't trust all the Indians." (128)

This is, of course, something Tayo has always known, but couldn't admit. He had felt he had to trust all the Indians, even when, like Emo, they were killers; he felt he had to write off all the white people, because Auntie had made that very clear: "He stopped there, unable to say any more. The birth had betrayed his mother and brought shame to the family and the people." (128)

Betonie, who has lived the same story for a long time and is an able medicine man, tells Tayo a story that is stronger and larger than the one Tayo has believed within himself most of his life. Betonie's story incorporates everything and everyone, all of time and all of space. It gives Tayo the belief that he is a necessary and valuable part of what is. And so strong is the story that Tayo can experience it within his own consciousness, his own life. (186) So Tayo realizes Josiah's dream by finding the strange, half-breed cattle. In doing this he accomplishes several tasks: he repays the debt he feels he owes his grandfather; he helps Josiah and the family; he learns the ancient truths of the land, and gains the aid of the land's spirits. And most of all he falls in love and learns the truth about distance: it doesn't exist in love, but only in the absence of it. And he learns something else: when he accepts the strangeness all around him, he can accept his own strangeness.

Like the old men, he couldn't decide who he was (233) until he was willing to experience himself as real and as unreal, as crazy and sane, as sick and as well, as loving and as unloved.

The understanding he finally comes to is simple: "the only thing is: it has never been easy." (254) Living is hard. It includes pain and death and drought. But the alternative is worse: to be alive and dead simultaneously is the true source of witchery and is the true nature of destruction. The woman tells him "Death isn't much. . . Sometimes they don't make it. That's all. It isn't very far away. . . There are much worse things, you know. The destroyers: they work to see how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten. They destroy the feeling people have for each other. . . Their highest ambition is to gut human beings while they are still breathing, to hold the heart still beating so the victim will never feel anything again. When they finish, you watch yourself from a distance and you can't even cry -- not even for yourself." (229)

There are two other things that Tayo learns from his encounter with Betonie's story. He finds that he is part of his family, that they are really parts of himself. He learns that "we came out of this land and we are here." (255) And when finally he understands all this, he knows the difference between being alive and being apart from his own aliveness, and this gives him the sure knowledge of belonging to himself and to the earth:

"The leaves of the big cottonwood tree had turned pale yellow; . . . They had always been loved. He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. (255)

The other thing he learns is that reality is not particularly exciting. Perhaps this was the understanding he had been avoiding all along, and perhaps it was this avoidance which created all the other misunderstandings. The thing about life is its ordinariness, its predictability, its eternal recurrence. Old Grandma tells him that, and maybe he understands.

'I guess I must be getting old,' she said, 'because these goings-on around Laguna don't get me excited any more.' She sighed, and laid her head back on the chair. 'It seems like I already heard these stories before. . . only thing is, the names sound different.' (260)

Silko is right: the story is what we make ourselves become; it is what we would like to believe we are. And Momaday is right: we become what we believe ourselves to be. The half-breed believes he is wrong, so he creates wrongness in his Indian self or in his white self. When he understands he is both and neither, that he is a human being participating within a human landscape, he will be a whole person, engaged in living the life he has instead of one he wished for. A true story makes a person's meaning truth.

When modern Native American literature joins the purpose of Native American traditional literature and the purpose of all creative expression, it will tell the truth about life as it is. And it will be a way of healing, of closing distances and of knowing that what is is enough. Or, as James Welch puts it:

Bones should never tell a story  
to a bad beginner. I ride  
romantic to those words,  
those foolish claims that he  
was better than dirt, or rain  
that bleached his cabin  
white as bone. Scattered in the wind  
Earthboy calls me from my dream:  
Dirt is where the dreams must end. (14)  
It is a simple, as ordinary as that. And as good.

- (10) James Welch, "Winter Indian," unpub. ms., 1971.  
(11) James Welch, "Blackfeet, Blood, and Piegan Hunters,"  
Riding the Earthboy 40 (NY: Harper, 1976), p. 36.  
(12) N. Scott Momaday, "A Man Made of Words," Literature of the American Indian. (13) Leslie Marmon Silko, Ceremony (NY: Viking, 1977), pp. 69-60; further citations by page in text. (14) James Welch, Winter In the Blood (NY: Harper, 1974), dedication.

Paula Gunn Allen

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Charles R. Larson. American Indian Fiction. Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1978. p. vii + 172. \$9.50 HB.

The first attempt at a comprehensive historical and critical overview of the novels written by Native Americans has recently been published and the book is an important one. Charles Larson examines fourteen novels by twelve authors in the seven chapters of his book and then in two appendices considers two works of rather dubious authorship. His analyses are intelligent and, in most cases, helpful, but the reader must deal with some minor problems first.

Larson, who has previously written on Third World literature, tends to compare the novels in American Indian Fiction to black American novels, even though he himself is quick to acknowledge that the validity of such comparisons is often questionable. Though not a major focus of the book, there are enough statements such as "the case is once again similar to that of a number of early black American writers" to distract a thoughtful reader. More important is Larson's tendency in the first chapter to refer to what the author's desire or intention was in writing a particular novel. This surmise and speculation may mislead the unwary, and the second chapter is not designed to balance the first. Rather, it is an examination of the Pocahontas story that seems to be connected to the rest of the text only tenuously until Larson sums up: "At its very origin, the Pocahontas myth is rooted in insidious racism;. . . the children of Pocahontas are not Indian, they are white;. . . Pocahontas ushered in a flood of assimilationist writings, rooted in simplistic logic."

In the next four chapters we are offered a generally chronological treatment of the novels written by American Indians. Larson does not include the novels of Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve or The Owl's Song by Janet Campbell Hall, presumably because they are perceived as written for a non-adult audience. Why he omits John Tebbel's The Conqueror is not apparent.

Larson's thesis is that Native American novels move from an interest in assimilation to a focus on rejection and then on to revising history and, on the contemporary scene, to offering various blueprints for survival. Some readers may find the categories too restrictive or too inclusive to be meaningful, but his structure at least has the advantage of making a disparate body of writing initially coherent.

The first category includes Chief Simon Pokagon's Queen of the Woods (1899) as the first novel in English by a Native American, John Milton Oskison's three novels, and John Joseph Mathews's Sundown (1934). Larson says that these novels are "conventional in form, traditional in subject, anything but innovative. It is easy to see why they have been forgotten." His inclusion of Oskison's Brothers Three (1935) in this assimilationist group is for me dubious, but that's the price one pays for order. McNickle's The Surrounded (1936) and Momaday's House Made of Dawn make up the second category, "primarily novels of renunciation -- wholesale rejection of the white man's world. The two works illustrate a new ideological stance: repudiation of the white man's world coupled with a symbolic turn toward the life-sustaining roots of a traditional Indian belief." Larson spends 18 pages on Momaday's novel, mentions the ambiguity of the albino/white man that Abel kills, does not mention the Melville/Momaday connection, and offers a reading of the ending that is intriguing and challenging. Dallas Chief Eagle's Winter Count (1967), Storm's Seven Arrows (1972), and Bedford's Tsail (1972) comprise the revisionist group, and in these novels "the collective situation, the shared experience of the group, is much more significant than what happens to the individual." Larson is more impressed with Storm's book than with the other two. The final category includes Pierre's Autumn's Bounty (1972), Welch's Winter in the Blood (1974), Nasnaga's Indians' Summer (1975), and Silko's Ceremony (1977). Larson's

explications of Welch's and Silko's novels are sensitive and enlightening, if sometimes curious ("James Welch's Winter In The Blood depicts Indians who have prospered on the reservation.") and sometimes debatable (these novels "tend to illustrate the positive aspects of this apartheid system, seeing in it a refuge for spiritual and cultural renewal --- both for the family unit, and, more important, for the future success of Pan-Indianism").

American Indian Fiction is a book worth reading, useful, and potentially controversial. In the final analysis, you read some, you write some, and you review some, This is one I wish I had written.

Kenneth Rosen - Dickinson College

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Drawn from Life: California Indians in Pen and Brush.  
Ed. Theodora Kroeber, Albert B. Elsasasser, Robert F. Heizer. Socorro, NM: Ballena Press, 1977. pp.295. 322 plates. \$8.95. Add: Box1366, Socorro NM 87801.

Occasionally a book comes along that is an anomaly, difficult to describe, to classify, and yet which evokes, as does Drawn from Life, an elusive sense both of delight and tragedy.

Several years ago, two of the editors (Kroeber and Heizer) collaborated to produce Almost Ancestors, a photographic portrait panorama of Native Californians. While the present volume does not purport to be an exhaustive inventory of all conceivable artistic sources, it does embrace the major highlights of three centuries of artists' renderings, before the era of the photographer.

The jacket of Drawn from Life bears the sketch of a graceful young Wintun or Patwin hunter from the Sacramento Valley region, ca. 1851. Here alone is a tale worth telling. The figure is striking. The lad might as easily have been posing for an Attic sculptor casting Apollo-the-far-shooting, clothed with but bow, arrows and quiver. For all the liveness

of line, it is the facial expression which aptly sets the tone for this book: the visual chronology of the tragic disappearance and extermination of many peoples in-one. The mélange of stoic patience and brooding melancholy traceable in his face recalls the leitmotif of Margaret Craven's novel "the depth of sadness" (I Heard the Owl Call My Name).

It is safe to say that never -- and possibly never again -- has quite such a book appeared. It is neither strictly anthropology nor art history, although indisputably Californiana. Contributors include European and American travelers, scientists, professional artists and writers, even J. W. Audubon. Some were fanciful romantics. Others, such as the French traveler Louis Choris (1816), depicted details of ritual pattern and practice among the Californians which otherwise would have been lost, so indifferent to such details were most missionaries. The "Notes to the Pictures" provide much information on the artists, of almost as much anthropological interest as the Californian subjects themselves.

For all its mysteries and inconsistencies California early was recognized as anthropologically almost self-contained. So there is unity in the "picture trail" format of the book which follows the scheme of "culture provinces" delineated by A.L. Kroeber in the Handbook of the Indians of California. Each province and its people is introduced by an effective sketch of ethnography and historical and geographical setting.

Good prose, like good poetry, demands hearing to evoke the lyric and emotional along with the narrative and objective. Mrs. Kroeber, an accomplished novelist, writes such prose, suggesting she might excel as a poet or playwright. Her narrative is appropriately punctuated by pieces of Native Californian poetry. Elsasser and Heizer add collaborative expertise, providing design and detail and scientific command of the subject matter. Drawn from Life is welcome in my library-- with its delights as well as its depth of sadness.

\* \* \* \* \* Dr. Dale Valory, Santa Cruz, CA \*  
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Long Division: A Tribal History; Poems, Wendy Rose.  
Strawberry Press, 11 Broadway, New York 10004. 1978 \$1.50

Difficulty arises when one tries to come to grips with Wendy Rose's little chapbook. The difficulty isn't deciding what she says, but in assessing the singular identity of her art.

The volume is divided into three sections, Anger, Learning to Love, Serenity. Ostensibly the series presents a brittle growth process for the individual; the implication is that the process may be a cultural one also. The four poems of "Anger" forge the present into a dusty distant past. Links are declared between the modern urban Indian and Indian ancestors, while counter to these a self-conscious voice sets up a you/us dichotomy with the ravaging urban Anglo society. The vision here is of the lost soul of the urban Indian. Yet, below the surface of the poems, appears the idea that such a condition is a pre-requisite for contact with the souls of lost generations. "Serenity" brings this to the surface by presenting a solution to, or at least a peace between, individual/cultural conflicts. While the dialectic is stated (perhaps even forced, as in "Mission Bells," where ancient Mayans haunt the barrio) the Native American's spiritual bond with nature is affirmed -- this undercurrent may suggest a tentative solution.

The four poems in "Learning to Love" explore Poetry and Song, and their unique affective powers. As a part of the maturation and epiphany that the structure of the book suggests, the powers of song and poetry are given a transitional role. They encourage integration and create a loving embrace with the world. In these poems Rose allows her highly compressed phrase- and image-making abilities that are her special strength to slip into the background. The rhythm through which the dominating idea behind the poem is realized takes over. Though her sense of rhythm is one of the best qualities of her work, Rose lets it break away here and produces interesting but unnecessarily convoluted lines like "Quiet/ in ways that are real, ways."

To my mind "Serenity" is the strongest section. Here the background of Hopi culture is taken naturally, and a subtle play between the individual and the culture comes out. Rose's strong sense of rhythm and her compressed phraseology appear in such first-class lines as "Falling through the years I/ am set in troubled silver." The continuity of generations themes, a little forced in the first section, here is effective, showing the individual in his/her inter-relatedness.

There is a great deal to Wendy Rose's poetry on all levels. Her voice is serious, perhaps too serious: her vocabulary can include abstract words such as "soul," "culture," and "love." Her sense of what she wants to say in a poem is overwhelming; to a large extent ideas control her poetry, sometimes weakening its effect. On occasion in descriptions of places or people the idea usurps the sensory reality. This intellectualization permits her marvelous suggestive quality of compression, creating gem-like edges, yet at times it seems unrelenting. Poundian compression is countered with a fine sense of subtle rhythm, which needs to be firmly tied to a progressive and projective movement of the whole poem. Rose's work is fertile ground on which to exercise your faculties, and is an important addition to contemporary Native American poetry.

Jim Ruppert Navajo Community College

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El Nahuatzen, a semi-annual magazine with emphasis on poetry by Chicano and Native American writers is edited by Lowell Jaeger, 310 Calvin Hall, Univ. of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242. Subscription is \$6.00/yr. Vol 1, No.1 has a handsome cover drawing by Leonard Youngbear and includes poems by William Oandasan, Maurice Kenny, Wayne Lasley, Lance Henson, Joseph Bruchac and Paula Allen among others. . . . .

Joy Harjo: newest book of poems is What Moon Drove Me To This, Reed & Cannon, Berkeley. . . . . James Hepworth's newest volume is Silence as a Method of Birth Control, Blue Moon Press, Univ. of Arizona, Tucson AZ, 85721. . . .

Shantih's Special Native American Issue, including contributions by Leslie Silko, Jeffrey Huntsman, Jamake Highwater, Paula Allen, Jim Barnes, Duane Big Eagle, Roberta Hill, Duane Niatum, Maurice Kenny Joseph Bruchac, Nila Northsun, Carter Revard, Simon Ortiz, Gerald Vizenor, ed. by Brian Swann, Available from Shantih, P.O. Box 125, Bay Ridge Station, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11220 for \$3.50. . .

And don't forget The Remembered Earth, Red Earth Press, P. O. Box 26641, Albuquerque, NM 87125. . . . .

Ye Galleon Press, Fairfield, Wash, 99012, is a small press producing excellent work at modest prices, concentrating on Northwest materials, including some Indian material, such as a booklet The Hero of Battle Rock, described by Ye Galleon's publisher Glen Adams as "about some brave white men armed with rifles and a small cannon who fought some cowardly Indians armed with bows and arrows in Oregon in 1851," and some valuable historical and ethnographic items. Highly recommended. . . .

Latin American Indian Literatures (Univ. of Pittsburgh, PA, 15260) remains available at \$5 per year for individuals, \$10 for institutions, but rates rise 50% March 1. . . .

Eugene Buechel's Lakota Tales and Texts is available from Red Cloud Indian School, Pine Ridge, SD. R.D. Theisz' Buckskin Tokens: Contemporary Oral Narratives of the Lakota (\$3) and (with Ben Black Bear Sr.) Songs and Dances of the Lakota (\$6) are available from the Sinte Gleska College Bookstore, Rosebud, SD 57770. North: Poems of Home by Maurice Kenny may be ordered for \$1.80 from Blue Cloud Abbey, Marvin, SD 57251; same address and \$2 gets you a year's subscription to Blue Cloud Quarterly.