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Ray Young Bear: Three Essays

Ray Young Bear:
Tribal History and Personal Vision

Ray Young Bear, born and raised on the Mesquaki Settlement near Tama, Iowa, is among a growing number of American Indian writers who have transmogrified the oral tradition of their people into a written form accessible to those outside of Native American culture. Still, Young Bear's poetry is elusive, punctuated by images and characters unfamiliar to many readers. In the prefatory statement to the book Young Bear acknowledges the obscure style and content of his writing: "There are no elucidations or foresights [merely] experiments with words." It is poetry of visions and dreams, surrealistic interpretations of Indian experience.

Such a collection as Winter of the Salamander presents many difficulties in its execution and its

acceptance. Although the contract for the book was signed with Harper and Row in 1975, Young Bear admits it took him years to actually put the collection together. Fear of the reaction from "university English professors," and an astute awareness that he needed carefully to scrutinize his work to avoid publishing material which tribal members might find too intimate for general dissemination prolonged work on the book. But the final collection, described by one tribal member as Ray's "grandmother speaking," should still any fears about its acceptance. Young Bear does consider himself his "grandmother's messenger," an emissary whose function it is to "preserve and collect the language of the Mesquaki." The many references to the seal are a direct response to a story told to him by his grandmother, a story which he has made his own in several poetic versions; and he is working on the translation of his grandmother's autobiography to preserve her stories in an even more direct way. The first poem of the collection, "grandmother," is a dedication to the woman he sees as preserver and transmitter of tribal ways:

if i were to see
her shape from a mile away
i'd know so quickly
that it would be her. . . .
i'd know
and her words
would flow inside me. . . .

Young Bear's references to his own grandmother link him to tribal members everywhere who believe that the grandmother earth is the soil from which they were created. The Mesquaki call themselves "the red earth people," having been formed of the rich red clay, the blood of their spiritual life-giver:

i walk over her head and remember
of being told that no knives
or sharp objects must pierce
inside her hair,
this is her hair.
another grandmother whose hair
i am combing.

Unlike some other American Indian writers, Young Bear does not consider himself part of the "contemporary American poetry scene"; he prefers the label "American Indian poet." He describes Winter of the Salamander as the "first step a child takes," the beginning of a long career which will include more poetry but also fiction and non-fiction. He is anxious to work on an anthology of literature and criticism by American Indian writers to test his assumption that American Indian critics react differently from non-Indians.

On a topic which continues to be discussed in both fiction and non-fiction, the place of mixed bloods or halfbreeds within tribal societies, Young Bear responds that mixed blood is not a negative term for him, that what mixed bloods have lost in blood quantum they can compensate for by participation in tribal ceremonies and rituals. He has no time, however, for those who come:

. . . claiming to be at least a good 64th
grabbing and printing anything
in scrapbook form
dedicating poems to the indian's loss
writing words and placing themselves
within various animals they knew nothing of

But of mixed bloods, he writes:

. . . they are told
to absorb themselves into religion,

to learn and to outdo some drunken
fullblood's life.

There are specific poems which can be directly tied to Mesquaki oral tradition. In "doors" the explanation of the coming of death is a brief summary of the longer story of the Mesquaki trickster character and culture hero, who knew that the world was not big enough for all people and so was forced to keep the spirit of his own brother from entering the lodge, resulting in death rather than eternal life for all people. In "catching the distance" there is an oblique reference to the tradition of ritualistically throwing lost baby teeth to ensure the growth of replacements. References to clans--bear, thunder, eagle, fox, fish, and wolf--appear throughout the poetry as do specific references to medicine and curing herbs, sweat baths, and menstrual taboos. The Mesquaki story of a boy who fasted too long and became a fish is re-experienced in "it is the fish-faced boy who struggles." Throughout the poetry the traditional stories are seen in all their relationships and possibilities; they are examined in their literary, psychological, cultural, and historical contexts.

Although Young Bear's poetry is infused with oral materials, it reflects contemporary experience as well. Young Bear acknowledges his often bitter tone, questioning himself about what may be "perhaps too much anger," but aware that the anger is real, nurtured by years of living on the edge of a white midwestern community which still knows little about its Mesquaki neighbors and generally avoids the dirt road through the Settlement. "in viewpoint: poem for 14 catfish and the town of tama, iowa" compares the Mesquaki "unparalleled/respect for the iowa river" with the actions of their white neighbors:

farmers and the local whites
from the nearby town of tama and
surrounding
towns, with their usual characteristic
ignorance and disregard, have driven
noisily
over the ice across our lands
on their pickups and snowmobiles,
disturbing the dwindling fish
and wildlife--

In the poetry the specific encounters of the Mesquaki with their Tama and Montour neighbors and the local laws are alluded to--the hunting rights case, ice fishing out of season, conflicts over land use. And Young Bear links his community with the larger Indian community, referring to the murder of an Indian in Gordon, Nebraska, and the Indian student's experiences in colleges and universities. In the end it is "community" that matters:

they can't seem to leave us alone.
until they learn that the world and time
has moved on regardless of whether they
still
believe and harbor antiquated ideas and
notions
of being superior because of their pale
light skin
alone, and until they learn that in their
paranoia
to compare us to their desensitized lives,
they will never progress into what they
themselves call a community,
or even for the least,
a human.

In Young Bear's poetry there is a sense of the mystery of life as it still exists, of the spiritual

powers which continue to guide, to thwart, and to inspire. He tells stories and recounts personal visions which reinforce his relationship with his people, putting himself within the circle of existence which includes the first people of red clay: his grandmothers, both real and mythical, and those people, animals, and places of his worlds.

(This essay is based on an interview with Ray Young Bear on June 3, 1981.)

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Outside the Arc of the Poem: A Review
of Ray Young Bear's Winter of the Salamander

This book collects most of the poetry Young Bear has published in the last ten years as well as some poems that have not been published. It has been said that a writer must serve a ten-year apprenticeship before he becomes accomplished. If that is true, then no doubt can be left that Young Bear has received his journeyman papers. The question may still arise, however, as to the selection of poems for a two-hundred page poetry book, large by any standards. Many young writers in the late sixties and early seventies were encouraged into anthologies, especially those classified as ethnic, before they were really ready. This resulted in the publication of work that may presently embarrass these writers. This raises the question of whether there is juvenilia here? Perhaps. It is, however, important to demonstrate Young Bear's versatility. While the book reveals a wide selection of different voices, poetic stances, and degrees of realism, there does seem to be some room for the culling and

selecting that occurs almost effortlessly for older writers through years of magazine publication. This book, of course, illuminates the range of Young Bear's work: some poems are very narrative and autobiographical, some very clear in their emotional centering, some very short, some exceedingly long.

Robert Gish has correctly pointed to the difficulties that a reader has when coming to Young Bear's poems, concluding that these are essentially the same encountered in any highly metaphoric, richly textured lyric poetry. Yet, in working with his poems, the reader perceives that there is not a goal to be reached, a metaphoric scheme to be uncovered which places all the elements of the poem in perspective. Rather, there is a sense of play between the poet and the text, which Gish sees as an internalized tension between the poet as producer and as listener. While Gish downplays the poetic experiment with words, he is essentially correct when he sees the result for the reader in "understanding" becoming "process as much as it is end; which is to say that one senses Young Bear is always involved with trying to understand his own act of poetizing whereby his poems become the self same attempt."

Since the poems may be seen as creative actions in and of themselves, there is a clear sense of play between the poles of perception in the poet and the reader. In this context, I would like to consider some criticism of Young Bear's work voiced by other writers, who say essentially that too many of his poems "don't work." Since this criticism comes from people deeply involved with poetry and culture, I set aside the possibility that this criticism is based on an unwillingness to give the poem a chance, to read it on its own terms, and to be willing to reread, sit and ponder. The criticism encompasses three areas. First, that the poems are not consistently presented in terms of one coherent pole

of perception. Second, that the images do not develop out of the poem, that seen from one pole of perception the images do not develop out of that perspective, but seem to be dropped in and then abandoned. Last, that this inconsistency of perception and image leads to an overemphasis on personal emotion since tone is taken to be the unifying element.

Let me deal with these one at a time. First, it seems clear that Young Bear's poetry does not usually center on one pole of perception in a poem and develop from that singular pole. Perhaps the question is, does he present the poem as a play between clearly recognized poles of perception. Obviously he does in some poems; nevertheless, there is an important strain in his work which attempts to value and record the variety of voices which cross his consciousness. There are some poems in which a recognizable narrator will bring in another character who then takes over the voice and perceptual base of the poem, only to be replaced by what seems to be an additional voice. (Whether or not the character is really outside Young Bear's consciousness, we do not know.) At this point, the reader may be unsure who is talking and how the perceptions of the narrative voice fit into previous images and perceptions. The reader remembers "being lost within our minds" with other selves speaking, wondering and perceiving. Because Young Bear's ability to fuse internal and external voices is almost mystic, it is perhaps best understood in this light.

Mysticism is concerned with vision and not sensibility. Perhaps these days we are too often concerned only with the poet's sensibility. For Young Bear, vision is closely linked with prophecy and fore-seeing, not with the practical terms of clairvoyance, but with those of understanding and belief. Many contemporary writers deal only with a

mundane voice of worldly affairs and a prophetic voice in which they step out of themselves and try to see the individual in terms of the universal. It is the tension between the two that creates the power of the poem. Young Bear's work always seems to be poised first on a high point of tension and then to bring in other voices, also balanced there. This makes for a difficult art, in which the prime concern is to penetrate that barrier which normally separates us from vision. It is not certain whether he wants the reader to experience vision or just to codify and explore his own. He attempts to penetrate the defensive illusions that lock us into the mundane self, to expose us to the force under the river in us (be it dreams, spirit or earth), and to reveal the source of our determinations of ourselves. Of course, this is a difficult poetry for the reader and the poet because the reader must be closely led. Voices whose paths lead outside the arc of the poem must be eliminated. Not all readers will respond to vision; many will be actively hostile. The writer must carry the extra burden to cull poems where the competition is too stiff or the vision found without enough context.

Next, the first impulse of a reader may be to ask if the images in the poem are allegorical or symbolic. While allegory and symbolism are used, they do not explain the meaning of the book as a whole. The images of the poetry can be illuminated more fruitfully either from a structuralist approach, which looks at images in a series of poems to reveal patterns, or from a deconstructivist approach which sees the images in a constant play² of voice and expectation. As I have said elsewhere, the reader is not dealing with a strict semiology of image, a one-to-one representation, but rather with images as they come in dreams, images that reveal rather than represent. Understanding must lead to vision, not to the symbolic representation of the

image.

Young Bear takes much from the oral tradition and the community, but his poems seem to be conditioned by the insight into how difficult it is to know one's mind completely, much less the mind of another. Inside his own mind he hears "A call / from another spectrum where / I am the earth / resulting in warped / generations. . . ." Still, informing the poetry is the fundamental belief in the common bond of nature, as well as the belief that by touching this bond through an essentially mystic process, along with spirit and man's story-making ability, we come closest to one another. Young Bear has made a unique and invigorating contribution to American poetry through this book.

¹Robert Gish, "Mesquakie Singer: Listening to Ray A. Young Bear," A, a journal of contemporary literature, 4, No. 2 (1979), p. 24.

²James Ruppert, "The Uses of Oral Tradition in Six Contemporary Native American Poets," American Indian Culture and Research Journal, 4, No. 4 (1980), pp. 100-103.

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On First Reading Young Bear's
Winter of the Salamander

Ray Anthony Young Bear is indeed a keeper of importance. Readers of his poetry, which began appearing with growing frequency in journals and reviews during the 1970s, sensed that Young Bear's arrival on the Native American literary scene was

special. In periodicals of varying importance his voice was heard, though perhaps not always fully understood: Northwest Review, The American Poetry Review, Poetry Now, Decotah Territory, Cutbank 5, Poetry Northwest, Sun Tracks, Partisan Review, The Great Circumpolar Bear Cult, Chicago Review, Phantasm, The Phoenix, Southern Poetry Review--and the list continues. Anthologies, which did much to further the new awakening of Native American literature in the '70s, invariably included Young Bear and helped make his poetry relatively more accessible: The Way, The Portable North American Indian Reader, Voices From Wah Kon-Tah, Carriers of the Dream Wheel, Voices of the Rainbow--in all of these Young Bear's surrealism brought new meaning to older conceptions of Native American poetry.

Among others, Richard Hugo, James Welch, Fred McTaggart, John R. Milton, and Mick McAllister offered early, positive responses to Young Bear's new/old voice. Winter of the Salamander, Young Bear's first book of poems, which culminated his '70s apprenticeship, confirmed in 1980 his eminence as a contemporary Native American poet. Almost upon publication, Winter of the Salamander became one of the half-dozen or so absolutely essential books to read (especially for non-Native Americans) for a no-holds-barred, angry, violent, grotesque, beautiful, loving look at the place and persona of an Indian poet's experience in a dominantly Anglo-American world. As such, it is a major revelation.

Both the paradox and the pity of the matter, however, is that like Tiger Salamander of his Iowa home, Young Bear and his book go more or less unnoticed by the average American reader (readers outside academic "Indian" circles), and Young Bear--even in the public mind of the Iowa press and media--remains unrecognized for what he is, not a tadpole or a mudpuppy among poets but a keeper and

sharer of importance with a tough, tigerish, plangent voice and identity all his own. Of course, poets other than the likes of The Rolling Stones or Waylon Jennings are ignored by the "common" reader too. And surrealistic poetry like Young Bear's is not easy to read. But if Winter of the Salamander is to really matter it should be discussed in populist as well as elitist contexts, which is to say simply that in a special sense Winter of the Salamander needs to be more widely read and not viewed as solely the province of highbrow followers of recent Indian "chic" literature, a book on yet another dittoed reading list.

For to read Winter of the Salamander is to know the anguish of "otherness," the mistake of racial, class, economic and cultural prejudice and stereotyping. To read Winter of the Salamander is to see a man and an "Indian" confessing the most intimate and honest of thoughts and feelings about interrelations and experiences. It is to know confusion and enlightenment, to follow a self search and a family search, to hear a proclamation of me in relation to you, now--and then. It is to encounter myth and the mundane. It is to experience utterly different yet hauntingly familiar words and images. It is to know the Mesquakies and Iowa and everyman, everyplace. It is to see animals and humans in the strangest, most magical of metamorphoses. It is to be happy and sad in front of a windowed, but expansive view of the "thingness" and alienation of America.

Representative of the important revelations attendant to reading Winter of the Salamander are two poems which first appeared in The American Poetry Review in the spring of 1978: "I Can Still Picture the Caribou," and "For the Rain in March: The Blackened Hearts of Herons." Long poems even for Young Bear, they run to nearly twenty pages in Part Four of Winter of the Salamander.

The persona in both poems speaks in first person of a world gone awry, of distortions where nothing fits, least of all the confessional speaker of the poems. Both poems turn from association to association, from one reality to another, day-awakening to daydream and fantasy, from conscious to subconscious, from pedestrian to sublime diction and imagery. The animals in the titles of both poems function as oblique "objective correlatives" for the state of mind and spirit of the persona himself, who in an ecological plight like the Alaskan caribou evokes the cry, "let's save the fucking things." Only in mind and memory can the victimized, and by implication doomed, speaker

. . . still picture the caribou,
running alongside a green moist hill
with its antlers raised up towards the
sky.
with clouds, everywhere.

The picture of that glorious escape, that proud, utopian freedom seems but a passing hope for the surgeon-surrounded patient with one lung, the vine-strangled junked car "passenger," the buffalo, bears, seals and seagulls who, in kinship with the speaker, face no future. The future, like the present, holds nothing like the wholeness of the past, a time when

seventy-five years ago, our places
were probably filled with dance
and constant prayer.
breath made of the day's
offering instead of alcohol.

The future is merely mutilation, symbolized by "a legless and headless man."

Cliches of marginality aside, in these poems as

in Winter of the Salamander in its complex entirety, the reader (particularly the non-Native American reader) encounters the reflection, the visage of himself or herself as very much a part of the victimizing process--in collective and individual terms. This dynamic of dual/split perception is introduced in the title of Part Four of the book: "The Sound He Makes--The Sound I Hear," and is reinforced in the parade of "persons" in "The Rain in March." Note the comically grotesque cigar-smoking badger who rams pieces of burning wood into his eyes in front of the hallucinating speaker who is used to seeing such things as "the struggling / black and yellow / spotted body of a salamander / freeing itself from a young / girl's womb," "a hand reaching into hot boiling / water," and

. . . the small hands
of a toad examining my round
face
the hammock moved within
the toad's breath and when he
walked away boils grew over the places
where it had touched me. . . .

In these images the speaker has seen reflections of himself, a self in his "life ahead," certain only that he "will never know who I actually am / nor will the woman who lives with me / know me or herself or the children / we want." The longhaired rednecks who the speaker fantasizes shooting with his automatic pistol, the fat redhead "pig" policeman whose brains the speaker envisions splattering everywhere with a well placed .38 slug behind the ear, the poets who think they know all about Indianness in claiming a "good 64th" degree of Indian blood--in these, as well as in the bullet-ridden "blackened hearts of herons" and the "dismembered body of a girl / scattered for a

quarter of a mile," are the darker, id-buried, marrow-deep horrors of not just Young Bear's violent imaginings but of man's cruelties to man and to nature at large.

Young Bear's importance as an artist, a poet, and a Native American is ultimately in his rendering of these primitive and shocking perceptions. With Winter of the Salamander Ray A. Young Bear proves himself a savage poet in something of the sense of Aldous Huxley's Savage in Brave New World, a savage who similarly is a keeper of importance--the importance of knowing pleasure and pain, of feeling the power of language, of the word.

Surrounded by savage voices of other kinds, more effete, subtle and subversive kinds, Winter of the Salamander is a book very much worthy of wider recognition, and Young Bear's savage voice is an important one for all to hear and heed.

Robert Gish
University of Northern Iowa

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Gerald Vizenor. Wordarrows: Indians and Whites in the New Fur Trade. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978. 164 pp. Hb. \$7.95.

Wordarrows graphically portrays the 1960's cultural word battles between Indians and whites in the "new fur trade," which Vizenor describes as those whites acting for, with, and against tribal families. In these cultural word wars, Indian "arrowmakers and wordmakers" survive through the power of sacred memories, as their oral traditions are pitted against the "wordless and eventless social and political categories" created by their white adversaries (p. viii). Three-fourths of the book deals with these word wars, many of which take

place on the battlegrounds of Minneapolis Indian agencies or Minnesota reservations. The final section of the book records Vizenor's observations while reporting the trial of Thomas White Hawk, a Sioux convicted of murdering a white storekeeper and his wife.

To chronicle the word wars, Vizenor relies on his own experiences as the director of a Minneapolis Indian employment program, as an educator, and as a reporter. He also relies on his knowledge of Indian storytelling (ancient and modern). His experiences and insights as a mixed-blood Chippewa who has lived both in Minneapolis and on the White Earth Reservation are most effectively demonstrated in the narratives entitled "Downtown on the Reservation." To the Indian section of Minneapolis come Roman Downwind, Marlene American Horse, Laurel Hole-in-the Day, and Baptiste Saint Simon, hoping to find moral and economic salvation in urban agencies for Indians established by whites. Instead, they find either a blonde volunteer who efficiently humiliates impoverished Indians or a director/trickster who can only befuddle them with word floods on how to save themselves and provide them without enough assistance to destroy them. Vizenor links his book to Indian oral traditions in his introduction by describing how an alcoholic, vomit-covered Indian woman, who has sought help at an Indian employment center, breaks into tribal song. This incident vividly illustrates the power of this tradition to survive and to bring peace to a troubled soul. In his narratives Vizenor incorporates such motifs from traditional tales as the animal husband and animal transformation. "In Feeding the Reservation Mongrels," a white liberal school teacher rejects relationships with reservation people to spend her time feeding their dogs. After making the dogs dependent upon her for food, she becomes weary of reservation life and abandons them. The two boxers

who manage to overtake her van become the lovers of this woman called "half dog" by tribal people. The tale also ironically portrays the relationship between white service agencies and the people they serve. The transformation motif is used in "Mother Earth Man and Paradise Flies." Zebulon Matchi Makwa (Evil Bear), whose mother compared him at birth to a bear, takes on the characteristics of a bear (a sacred Ojibwa totem), as he reaches adulthood. Never able to hold a teaching job for more than a year because of his putrid stench and permanent blanket of flies, Matchi Makwa achieves a measure of success at Indian education conventions as a long-winded but amusing storyteller and sometime seducer of blondes. The story is a convoluted but humorous portrait of the professional convention goer whose wisdom is belied by his external appearance.

The book is also linked to oral tradition through Vizenor's experimentation with the use of the trickster figure, presented in many guises and situations. As one who has been transformed, trickster appears as Matchi Makwa, whose normal foul smell is accented by his filthy clothes. As wise fool, he appears in the character of Baptiste Saint Simon, a mixed blood who seeks, but miraculously never finds, work. As Erdupps MacChurbbs, trickster emerges in Berkeley to engage a mixed-blood hippy in a duel of double-talk. And, as Ishmael, he describes his childhood career as a trickster who burned down the shabby homes of tribal women to enable them to qualify for government housing. Like the traditional trickster, Ishmael overreaches when he burns down the shack of a woman who does not want a new house. Most frequently, however, trickster appears as Clement Beaulieu, a semi-culture hero who plays the role of "truth-speaker." Shooting his wordarrows in all directions, Beaulieu confuses white bureaucrats and Indians alike.

The word-war narratives end with the devastating

portrait of how a white educator has taught an Indian child to be proud of his heritage: he has trained the child to perform the Lord's Prayer in sign language while doing an Indian dance and wearing a ceremonial headdress of dyed chicken feathers. The answer to Beaulieu's horrified outcry of "What have you done to that child" is given in the chapters devoted to Thomas White Hawk. Here, Vizenor forcefully shows that the cultural conflicts suffered by Indian children can lead to self-destructive violence. Though he details the brutality of the murders committed by White Hawk, Vizenor emphasizes that the Sioux college student was himself a victim of neglect by his Indian parents, of goals set by a white guardian who abandoned him after his arrest, and of education by white institutions. This section of the book focuses on the hatred of Indians expressed by the townspeople, the bizarre love affair between the imprisoned White Hawk and the white wife of the local minister, and the successful efforts of Indians (including Vizenor) to get White Hawk's sentence commuted from death to life imprisonment.

Wordarrows is a complex book. It is a vivid account of the continuing cultural wars between white institutions and Indian people. One of the few books to deal realistically with the lives of urban Indians, it is a good reminder that half of American Indians now live in cities. To portray the cultural wars between whites and Indians, Vizenor uses ironic humor combined with incisive character portraits. Occasionally, however, Vizenor's fondness for elliptical style and word games distract from the clarity of the narrative. Also, the fictional narrator Clement Beaulieu, usually wise if not always witty, sometimes becomes intrusive. Nevertheless, Vizenor's sharp eye for detail and penetrating characterizations outweigh these weaknesses. The book should be read both for its

strong statement about Indian-white relations, and for its imaginative blending of oral and written narrative.

¹American Horse and Hole-in-the-Day are the names of famous chiefs. American Horse (Oglala Sioux, 1840-1908) advocated peace with the whites. An outstanding orator and diplomat, he unsuccessfully tried to talk to death the negotiators of the treaty designed to take from the Oglalas most of their South Dakota land. Hole-in-the-Day, the elder (Ojibwa, 1825-46), led his people in constant warfare against the Sioux. He was succeeded by his son who took advantage of agreements made on behalf of his people to enrich himself and his friends. He defied, however, efforts to remove the Chippewa to the White Earth reservation, and was subsequently murdered in 1868 by members of his own tribe.

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Beginning this fall, it is possible for students to earn an M.A. in American Indian Studies at the University of Arizona. Students may concentrate in one of several areas. Also, students can earn a Ph.D. in American Literature with a concentration in American Indian Literature through the Department of English. Faculty includes Vine Deloria, Jr., N. Scott Momaday, Barbara Babcock, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Larry Evers. Financial aid is available for superior students. Address inquiries to: Prof. Robert K. Thomas
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