

[[The Dispatch](#): The Newsletter of the Center for American Culture Studies, Columbia University, 6.1 (Fall 1987): 5-8.]

{5}

Interview with Karl Kroeber

With this issue, Studies in American Indian Literatures becomes incorporated into The Dispatch. Current subscribers to SAIL should note that the fusion of publications will lead to no diminution of material focused on concerns of Native American literatures. The next issue, for example, will feature the transcription, translation, and analysis of a major new collection of Yaqui coyote songs by Larry Evers and Felipe S. Molina.

The following interview with Karl Kroeber, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at CU, continues the series of talks with members of the Columbia University and National Advisory Boards of the Center.

CACS: Most of the work you have done as a scholar and critic has focused on British Romanticism--your volume, *British Romantic Art*, came out just over a year ago, I think. And that leads to a rather obvious opening question: how did you become interested in Native American literatures?

Kroeber: Family must have had its effect. Indians were important in the Alfred Kroeber household when I was a boy--one wanted to make me an honorary Papago and tried to teach me their ritual dances. Later, both my mother and historian brother wrote fine books about Indians. But my professional work as a comparative Romanticist was probably decisive. Romantic art gives voice to victims of Enlightenment rationality and technological conquests. So when my attention moved to America, I was naturally drawn less to apologists for Western progress like Emerson and Whitman, than to the peoples exploited by Eurocentric imperialism. And once I had stumbled into the unwesternized world of aboriginal literatures, a wilderness unlittered by academic critical trash, I felt intellectually reborn.

CACS: Is that why you began SAIL?

Kroeber: Oh, but I didn't. What happened was this: I had become interested in Native American literatures in the early part of the 70s and attended a couple of meetings of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures (ASAIL). That organization was actually founded in 1971, by Randall Ackly and Paula Gunn Allen. As the acronym suggests, it was an aggressive organization, late 60s social reform, focused on Indians, that floundered and struggled. They had quite sporadically produced a newsletter, and they asked me if I would take it over, which I did. And that's why the principle thing I did first was get out four issues a year, to establish a kind of stability. Indians, of course, belong to different tribes, and there's still some competition among them. That is exacerbated by regional differences--people in the Southwest, up in the Northwest, and the Northeast all have very different kinds of interests and agendas. I was a neutral, a non-Indian but somebody who had long family associations with Indian matters.

CACS: Does the Association still exist?

Kroeber: Yes. And it meets regularly at the MLA, and that's why we keep the subtitle of SAIL as the newsletter for the association.

CACS: Would you say that its literary nature then has much to do with Paula Gunn Allen's contribution?

Kroeber: It was literary to begin with. But it wasn't just Allen. Randall Ackly, an interesting person, currently teaching in Jordan, had high hopes for contemporary literature solving social problems. I'm the person that has really swung SAIL toward interest in traditional literatures. I don't mean to suggest by that there's been resistance, but the original interests were strictly contemporary. AIM was in its heyday, and ASAIL was to raise consciousness and extend Red

power.

CACS: By focusing on the literary, did that raise any questions? How was that received?

Kroeber: It was felt that there was a possibility of expanding what is now called the American Indian Renaissance. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize in 69 and that helped raise awareness of Indian writing and already people like Leslie Silko and James Welch were beginning to publish poetry. That was an expression of Indians' desire to affirm themselves by creating a poetic literature. Traditional literatures had lots of poetry. And poetry you can publish cheaply; you can have readings--it becomes a social form. In the late 60s and early 70s, most of the literary work being done by American Indians was in the form of poetry.

CACS: But wasn't it also because it's related to the traditional song forms?

Kroeber: It is, and I don't mean to deny that relation. But Indians also have plenty of stories. Indians are storytellers. So why not short stories or novels? But disadvantaged people can write poems more easily than stories; you can articulate important feelings or experiences, and then get them published, because you can publish poems with no more than a mimeograph machine. Now as the "Renaissance" has become professionalized, the major form of Native American literature is taking the shape of prose.

CACS: And SAIL has changed along with those forms?

Kroeber: At first we were mostly referring to and reviewing poets and poetry and calling attention to poetry readings and chapbook publications. A lot of this was connected with small presses, of which there are fewer and fewer. Joe Bruchac just closed down; I don't know if Maurice Kenny's Strawberry Press is really functional. Little magazines are naturals for polemics and poetry--and we now see less of these.

CACS: To what extent was SAIL actually doing independent research? To what extent was it gathering information?

Kroeber: At first it was simply collecting information and functioning as a resource. What we did originally was almost purely reviews and bibliographies. In the 70s there began to be courses offered in Native American literature, which there had never been before. A large number of our original subscribers were people, usually in English departments, who wanted to give courses in Indian literatures. There were also founded at the end of the 60s, particularly in a state like California, several Native American programs. But many of our subscribers were non-Indians in English Departments getting the idea that they could give a course, but not knowing what the materials were. Our early emphasis was as a resource for teachers. A couple of times we have offered model curricula for beginning teachers.

{6}

CACS: How do you want to change SAIL, and how do you want to conceive of these changes?

Kroeber: SAIL served a function of sustaining and supporting people when the field was getting started. Just its existence gave a kind of authenticity, legitimacy to disempowered people. I came from Columbia University, and was recognized in the profession. And that helped. A lot of the people doing this new work were assistant professors without tenure, or if they were professors, they didn't have much reputation or clout. But it seems to me, and of course I could be wrong, but it seems to me that our field has passed that stage. The field is established; where it ought to go now is into American Studies. I would like to merge SAIL into the larger context of American Studies. There are complexities in that. For instance, one of the places that I hope and believe there will be development is in the Native literatures in their Native languages.

CACS: Do you think this kind of expansion is still going on? In connection with this idea, you were talking about the Native American Renaissance. Is that over? Is the field going to be going down as you see it?

Kroeber: I'm not sure of the statistics, but my impression is that the Native American Studies programs are at a steady state, not growing. Literature is only one part, and usually a minor part of such programs; legal and historical courses tend to be stronger elements in them. That's one reason that our contribution was always more important to institutions *without* a Native American Studies program. There has been a little growth, and a little strengthening of the Native resources on reservations and among Indian groups. The Sioux, for example, have been able to establish language teaching classes. But Indian literary studies are changing. And that's what I'm concerned about. As an independent field, Indian literature has reached the stage where there are now an established number of writers, producing a body of contemporary work that can be dealt with, but that remains really very small. You name a dozen authors, and you've

about covered it. How can you build a genuine field out of that, unless you're connecting these writers with American culture in general, with other ethnic groups of the American mainstream? I would take Vizenor's moving from the University of California at Berkeley, where they have a Native American Studies program, to Santa Cruz, where he works with Native American material in an American Studies program, as symptomatic of the direction we ought to go.

CACS: Silko's *Ceremony* is being read in American literature classes, and the work that you do also utilizes Native American Literature.

Kroeber: Right. I'm doing Welch's *Fool's Crow* in a course on fictional theory.

CACS: Do you think that Afro-American studies programs and gay and lesbian studies should be incorporated into other departments rather than each being a separate discipline?

Kroeber: Well, remember, I'm not an Americanist; but, perhaps because I'm an outsider, I can see Jack Salzman's approach here, what is called American Studies, as the best way of allowing specialists to retain their peculiar integrity and identity yet affect a wide audience. Native American studies is marvelous because, unlike say, Black studies, or Chicano studies, there are genuine Native American traditions on this continent underlying all Indian works. And nothing that is done by Native American writers will ever detach them from that heritage. At the same time, there are also ways in which their current role in American culture is analogous to that of blacks and so on.

{1/2 column photo of Karl Kroeber }

CACS: Could you elaborate on that difference? Because, of course you wouldn't deny that there is a black tradition.

Kroeber: I mean *the* problem with the blacks is that they were grabbed in Africa and brought over here as slaves and violently cut off from their language and their culture. This is what *Roots* is about, trying to re-establish these. The tragedy of their situation is precisely that they were put in an enslaved condition, cut off from their cultures, and therefore their situation is tremendously difficult. The Chicano situation is still different because the mixing of Spanish and Native is different, I would say, from the North American experience. Just take populations: there were very few Spaniards and there were lots of natives south of the Rio Grande. North of it there were English, French, German, and so on, not as many natives. But my key point is that Native North Americans have preserved a continuity of traditions going back into their pre-European life: that is the difference from the blacks' circumstances.

CACS: But is it? For both there's still that same dislocation.

Kroeber: It's not the same, though both peoples have been victimized. It really is different if you go into Africa and grab people and put 'em in a boat and take 'em over and sell them as slaves. The American Indians were not made slaves. They were killed, pushed off their land, and put on reservations, but many sustained their social structures and unique cultures. There were systematic efforts to eliminate their languages, but they didn't {7} work. I'm not expert in this, but one of the things that strikes me as I look at blacks trying to recover their heritage is the generalization and the abstraction they're driven to, as compared to Native Americans who can go directly back to differentiated tribal units. You're a Sioux, Hopi, Papago, and you go back to specific myths, ceremonies and languages that have been continuously vital for centuries. *Vis-à-vis* the American mainstream, I think reds and blacks have a lot of positions they can share, and it's good for them to get together to assert the importance of their various ethnicities, but I see them as distinct. American Studies seems to me marvelous in the sense that it gives an overall rubric justifying study of this integrity of diverse groups.

CACS: So the difference between say blacks and Native Americans would make a difference in the way that they're studied or approached academically.

Kroeber: Probably. Of course you're really dealing with a political problem. Given this strange and terrible situation that the blacks were in, I can understand the necessity, politically, for their asserting their independence and saying "We are a separate field." But let me give you a specific example; it seems to me, insofar as I know about black writing, Langston Hughes, and Baraka, and Ellison, and Toomer, that these writers speak to the urban experience for all people. They often describe city problems. You look at the Native American stuff, and it's mostly, though not entirely, about people who are in the country. That simply indicates a kind of difference.

CACS: I would question even that though, because it seems like one could equate a reservation situation with an urban ghettoization.

Kroeber: It would be a simile. Actually, more than half of the Indians in the United States live in urban centers. So it is interesting how little of their literature has really dealt with it. The urban tends to be treated as peripheral, as in *House Made of Dawn*. Looking at it the other way, to go back to James Welch, I can't conceive of *how* a black person could write a novel like *Fool's Crow*. Welch can write a novel about the essential destruction of his culture because he has an unbroken connection through the remnants of it right into its ancient and evident continuities, including geographical situations.

CACS: Then in the field of Native American Studies, how does one encompass this whole long tradition?

Kroeber: That's a real problem. I actually wrote a little essay about it that will be published in Italy. The point I'm getting at is that you've got to change the whole nature of Comparative Literature. Because when you leave the contemporary, Indians writing in English, you're back with people who have hundreds of different languages. And my suggestion is, just to answer one part of your question, that you say Comparative Literature doesn't *start* with competence in language. Comp. Lit. was invented by Europeans, and I believe language competence was a device to keep third world people marginal. If you stick to Europe, you can just know a few Romance languages, and that's a good way of assuring that American Indians, Africans, Melanesians, you name it, aren't going to be in Comp. Lit. in any serious fashion. I say, do it the other way around. Figure out first what are the subjects that you ought to study, or the methods, the theories of study. Then figure out which language you should learn. Once you throw it open, just say in North America; you've got 2 to 3 hundred languages, with 2 to 3 hundred literatures. Comp. Lit. V becomes something different. That's what we haven't recognized.

CACS: So it's not even simply method and theory, but culture.

Kroeber: Right. But again, that's where I think theory and method come in. You start out and say "What do we mean by genres? We work from certain concepts of what a genre is, but could we rethink those concepts?"

CACS: But that is quite interesting because it's not so much what Comp. Lit. can do for Native American studies, but what Native American studies can do for Comp. Lit. This would cause us to reevaluate the field at large.

Kroeber: Right on. Absolutely, I think it would make Comparative Literature, for the first time, a responsible and significant field.

CACS: So practically, then, how would one in the field begin to address this?

Kroeber: I think it means asking what are the questions we should ask about literature? What are our problems really? What's the study of literature for? Develop what I would call hypotheses about that. And then start looking around and, if we've got a problem, say, with genre, the thing is not to look from John Keats to a Frenchman to a Russian to a Spaniard, but to something really far out, like a Northwest Coast person, or somebody in Africa.

CACS: So what has created these boundaries? Is it traditional academia?

Kroeber: Comparative Literature is so Eurocentric that I think it is unconsciously an expression of resistance to outside things. English is the same thing. This was set up by a bunch of snobs in Eastern universities. You couldn't get a Ph.D. in American literature in this country until the late 30s.

CACS: Could you elaborate on the idea of a theory that would incorporate Native American languages and literatures into Comp. Lit.?

Kroeber: Well, what I mean by theory is simply asking very fundamental questions about literature, and about the study of literature: why you're studying. This is where the contemporary concern with ideology seems to me important. In the last 15 years people have gotten aware that what they're doing is not at all that objective, that it's an expression of certain attitudes and views.

CACS: To what extent has contemporary theory facilitated this kind of thinking?

Kroeber: Contemporary theory has in fact not seriously addressed the problem of marginal or third world literatures, though I think the whole wrestling with theoretical and methodological problems opens that possibility. Edward Said, in his insistence that one look beyond the immediate tradition to other ways of looking at things, points this way. But I don't know that outside of *Orientalism* Edward has done much specifically with third world literatures. Of course a lot

of theorists are people at universities like Yale and countries like France whose attitudes toward third world peoples strike me as suspect. But against theorists' will, even, modern theory opens the world up. Wolfgang Iser, as far as I know has never himself gone beyond the Western tradition, but I think what he's talking about, about how the recipient produces the work, could be carried very easily to, say, a tribal situation, and instantly all sorts of new insights begin to appear.

I want the theory used so that the marginal and the excluded will be recognized. This is illustrated by feminist studies. When you open the idea up that a woman might have a way of writing and a way of responding to writing and be caught in a culture in a different way from a man, it leads to all kinds of exciting concepts. I think feminist studies have totally revolutionized the study of 19th-century fiction. All the best work on Victorian fiction in the last decade has been by people who suddenly realized {8} those novels are all about the problems of women. Some are written by women, the Brontes and Eliot, and then you go back to Jane Austen. You begin to see that the nearest analogy we have to her relation to her culture is black writing today. She's writing from the underside of that "idyllic" culture that everyone talks about. It was an idyllic culture if you were a man and belonged to the gentry. But if you were a woman, you saw the underside. And her novels are exposes of that. Once you begin to see that, you see why she's such a powerful writer. The same approach could make the writings of the Indians, blacks, and so forth central, not just exotic.

CACS: How specifically, though, does Native American literature change our approach?

Kroeber: Well, I have learned a great deal about all literature from struggling with these Indian texts which are just absolutely baffling. I have only been able to offer my course every so often, but all the students always go through exactly what I do. You start on this text, and you don't know what the hell to do with it. Say you begin with a little story, it's about three sentences long, and the first thing you have to do is to learn how to deal with what you read in thirty seconds. Well, you think about it, and you finally discover that it has fascinating powers of connection and implication.

One of my first articles on these texts in the *Georgia Review* contrasted an Ojibway buffalo dance song and Keats's "Fall of Hyperion," to demonstrate different modes of literature's relationship to power. In the Western tradition, a poem or work of art is sort of a black hole; it absorbs power. The poet writes a poem, then we all study it; power goes in there and never goes elsewhere. The Indian poem is a way of *transmitting* power.

Indian poetry keeps things in balance. "The Fall of Hyperion" was not an accidental choice, because Keats was questioning his art very intensely, asking, "what is art good for?" It mentions Indians as maybe doing something else, and it also questions the relation of dreams to poetry. Whereas the little buffalo dancing song uses words that were literally dreamed then are danced, sung, and acted out. You compare the two works, and it changes all your view of what literature can be and can *do*.

CACS: Are there any similarities?

Kroeber: If you want a kind of coincidence, in the North American continent you had 3 to 5 hundred aboriginal cultures. OK. So the whites came in from Europe and pretty much wiped these people out. But whites established what is probably the most significantly multiethnic culture in the world. I don't know if there's something about the geography of North America that makes this diversity; I don't know what to make of that. And yet this is something you get hints of in Louise Erdrich, unconsciously, in her response to multiplicity, ethnic things particularly connected with the German and the Indians who lived in the Dakotas. There's another side to this. I am anxious that studies of Native American literature be in as strong a position as possible *vis-a-vis* anthropology and linguistics. There's a very interesting phenomenon here. At the end of the 19th and the first forty years of the 20th century, there was this enormous collecting done by anthropologists and linguists of languages and cultural material. Just fabulous collections. I don't know any other part of the world that had that kind of comprehensiveness. But why did the literary get so overlooked by the original anthropologists and linguists?

CACS: It seems that the study of anthropology may have arisen with the intent to dominate the cultures that were being studied.

Kroeber: Actually that is true for some anthropologies. American anthropology had the benefit of coming out of the German tradition which starts with Herder. Herder's view is that all cultures are different but equally valuable. I understood completely the argument of someone like Leslie Silko, you know, who says these ethnologists come and steal our stuff. I think she's wrong; she's historically mistaken, although I understand why she says that. But American anthropology is distinct from most other anthropologies. The vision that Boas had was: here are these hundreds of cultures, and they're dying, vanishing. So get out there and preserve what you can, because this is the evidence of human diversity. We *all* lose if this material is lost. I don't mean that there weren't other elements in it. But basically I think the

preservation motive dominated.

In its heyday, 1890-1940, American anthropology collected and saved, rather than classifying and judging. There are more than a dozen languages about which we'd know nothing if an anthropologist with a notebook hadn't reached a last living speaker, but as a result nobody paid much attention to possible aesthetic dimensions in the material collected.

CACS: What is going on now in these fields related to the study of Native American materials?

Kroeber: Linguists are becoming interested again in Native American languages and younger anthropologists are returning to the earlier ethnographic collections. When literary critics join with these scholars you have a truly exciting new discipline: ethnopoetics. Ethnopoetics recovers the art from materials--usually oral but not necessarily so--that heretofore have been treated as if without aesthetic dimensions. And criticism is crucial in this operation because full understanding of any culture or language requires appreciation of its verbal arts.

This brings me back to what I was saying earlier about how study of Native American literatures could transform Comp. Lit. Ethnopoetics plants so-called marginal and third world literatures at the center of criticism and so gives you a solid basis for re-evaluating traditional western conventions, genres, canons--not to mention the theoretical bases of our critical procedures.

CACS: Does that mean study of traditional literature should take precedence over contemporary work?

Kroeber: Not at all. The problem is to recognize that contemporary literary works by Indians, blacks, Asians, all of the peoples we've treated as peripherals, are connected one way or another to traditions with which we're unfamiliar. We can't understand what they are doing now, and why they're trying to do it, until we perceive how such work may be linked to traditional elements all the way from formal literary structures to what Bakhtin calls speech genres, completely different from what we're capable of recognizing. It's that kind of linkage--which as often as not is a matter of deviance or rejection as it is conformity--between the contemporary and the traditional I'd like to see the new form of SAIL explore. But--do I have time for one more point?

CACS: If it's brief.

Kroeber: What nobody has yet confronted is the possible interactions among nonwestern literary traditions. So far we've concentrated on the relationship between mainstream and one different mode. But I believe there would be substantial benefit in dialogues between many different kinds of traditions and aspirations. I'd like to see SAIL help to pioneer that kind of dialogue between cultures, between ethnicities, so that we don't fall back into just another form of the old overspecialization. That's why I'm such a partisan of what this Center does--it brings people and disciplines together interactively instead of reinforcing the old isolations and hostilities.