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The Cultural Twilight

David Treuer

I want to begin by saying how privileged I feel to be included in today's proceedings—to be included in the celebration of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (AICRJ) and to toast forty years of American Indian studies at UCLA. The AICRJ and the American Indian studies program at UCLA gave me, some years ago, when I was already an established novelist but not yet a critic, a chance to dip my toes in the warm waters of literary criticism, and for that I remain extremely grateful. I had a chance to practice thinking, to practice ideas, to try them out in print and conversation when those ideas weren't in any way clear to me (much less clear to others), and to make them better. This was an invaluable experience for me as a young critic, and I was, am, and will always continue to be extremely grateful. The AICRJ and the American Indian studies program at UCLA not only give opportunity, they give respect and honor—to dissent, to critical thinking, to experimentation. In doing so, they have been and will continue to be fundamental to the practice of American Indian studies as a vibrant, diverse, necessary, and exciting field. I am also thrilled to be on this particular panel with friends and colleagues, some of whom I've not had the chance to meet in the flesh and some I have; all of whom have, in their own idiom, pushed the field (and my own thinking) further. I thank you. I also want to thank you for this chance to talk rather than write—talks are thrilling in that one can indulge more freely in unsubstantiated generalities and make grand, sweeping claims. Not only is this fun, it can also be a pleasurable stage in the production of knowledge—flights of fancy before hard facts.

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Today I want to look back over the field of Native American literature and criticism, then peek at the present, and last, make some predictions as to where we are all going. I think there is much to celebrate. There are, I think, some trends to notice and perhaps to address as well. All of this falls out as some good news, bad news, and more good news.

Let me begin with some good news. In his first words to us, Paul Apodoca framed this panel as having two poles, two strains, two approaches in Native American studies—one, “the belief that such programs serve as an interface to provide the Native community with a voice (activist positioning) and the belief in Native studies as a legitimizing practice.” I would suggest that Native American studies (Native literature and criticism in particular) during the Renaissance united the two. Then, as now, to be Indian and to be alive was political because to exist as Indian people and communities was in defiance of the coldest wishes of the United States, which, if it had its way, would rather all of us were fertilizing the heart of the heartland. That can’t be disputed. Native American literary studies united activism and legitimization because Native American studies was seen as derived from and interfaced with Native American communities and cultures. Rightfully so—Native American literature and criticism, from the novels and essays of Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday to the poetry and essays of Simon Ortiz and Joy Harjo, made claims for notice because it was literature and not folklore, and because the canon and “the West” and the “mainstream” and “American society,” beset by ills and omissions, turned in some ways to us for answers and cures. Phil Deloria was right—they tried to kill us in order to become us, and it was largely through the activist, legitimizing practices of Native American studies along with activism proper and the activist agenda of people like my grandparents and parents just to remain alive that the United States had to settle with emulating us while we were still alive to berate them for it. In order to claim space for its expression, American Indian literature and criticism argued, rather counter to mainstream critical practices, that its subject and method was other, different, because its subject was its method. Native American literature and criticism argued that even though the literature was largely in English, the structure and sense and politics of the thing was Indian and derived from Indian ways of thinking and making meaning, from Indian people and Indian communities. If it wasn’t, it should be. The result was genius work in English by educated artists such as Silko, Louise Erdrich, James Welch, Harjo, Michael Dorris, and Momaday that pushed our thinking out and back—out into new artistic terrain and back to a fundamental questing mode centered around what it was to be Indian. That was the good news.

But, as the surge of Indian self-expression grew, it created some troubling news. In particular, I think the claims for political and cultural importance of

literature and criticism might often—especially of late—be overstated. The links between American Indian studies programs and the material discussed inside them and reservation and urban communities might not be as strong as people in the academy want to believe, certainly not as strong as I would like. What was happening in the academy in the 1980s and 1990s often had precious little to do with the mean struggles going on at Pine Ridge, Leech Lake, and other places. It had very little to do with lived languages and cultures. The criticism and the literature were good at evoking communities and cultures—and community and culture are themes of the field, but they aren't necessarily practices. For example, except for the ways in which an occasional Ojibwe word appeared in the early work of Gerald Vizenor, one had to wait until very recently for any kind of serious use or discussion of the Ojibwe language in anyone's work. To say that the English we use is a way of appropriating or reinventing the enemy's language might make us feel better about one of the effects of genocide, not to mention colonialism, but it has the effect of eliding the power and importance of Native cultures and languages. I feel strongly that to suggest that Indian academia and living Indian communities are on the same page, are even of the same paper, might dangerously privilege the academy and undervalue and undermine the concerns of Native American communities, many of which are struggling with issues of poverty and power and the fight to hold on to languages and cultures. For example, to struggle into print or into tenure or for conference funding is not the same as, say, struggling with the paternalism (at best) and dismissive policies of the county sheriff, which is often the case in many counties that overlap Indian lands. Nor is encouraging Native students to continue on in graduate school and supporting them while they are there—as vital as that is—the same as or even similar to addressing the vast disconnect between Native high school students and the tribal and community colleges near them. The limited representation we have in the academy dwarfs the representation of Native issues in the curricula of public schools, which almost never touches on treaty rights, government-to-government relationships, or the structure of tribal governments; curricula that in no way speaks to the realities of Indian students or the state or private universities and colleges farther away that seem almost unattainable given the lack of excellence in many rural and tribal schools.

Moreover, the literature, even much by our most celebrated and canonical writers, is often of mixed quality. As is much of the criticism. It is wishful (if not hopeful) for Silko to claim that her commercially successful novels, stories, and paid public lectures are spoken from a Pueblo perspective just as it is wishful thinking on Vizenor's part to link up his creative exercises in critical expression with Ojibwe types and tropes taken out of the language and often lacking historical, cultural, and social context. Such moves serve the writer, and

despite the unbalancing and freeing of the field, the work legitimizes the elite producers' knowledge at the expense of culture and context. Silko might be right in her essay, "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Perspective," when she claims that words are stories. It seems opportunistic at best to pretend that words have stories but only when we want them to. *Nationalism* is, for instance, a word with a story and not a pretty one. *Nazi*, after all, is short for *Nationalsozialist*, and they, too, promoted a kind of underdog nationalism, threatened from without by forces that sought to overwhelm it. One can't help but hear the same tone in calls to literary nationalism that one hears in exhortations to "take back America." We often evoke *sovereignty* as a watchword in the field and often do so without much self-criticality. *Sovereignty*, after all, was a word used by Chip Wadena at White Earth when he was charged with corruption, embezzlement, and fraud. The words *vanguard* or *intellectual elite* have stories too, but no one is very anxious to tell them.

Scholarship, I think, should be more than the evoking of tradition. To gesture toward it is not a methodology much less a method of inquiry. Louis Owens, in what is a wonderful introduction to *Other Destinies*, maintains that "in spite of the fact that Indian authors write from very diverse tribal and cultural backgrounds, there is to a remarkable degree a shared consciousness and identifiable worldview reflected in novels by American Indian authors, a consciousness and worldview defined by a quest for identity" (1994, 20). A quest for an identity is not a worldview nor is it a politics. Identity may not be a politics, but it is political, and the field—in this its middle phase—is often consumed with the question of it even more than it has informed the literature, as Owens rightly suggests.

In the final analysis, not a small amount of the literature is sentimental and likewise the scholarship. Lyricism in the service of romanticism. Essentialisms imposed on us from the outside replaced with essentialisms of our own manufacture. Regardless of where one weighs in on what seems like a debate between literary cosmopolitanism and literary nationalism (a clash in which the first things to perish are literature and culture), the predicament of culture might well look different when we seek to find parallels or even antecedents. One only need look to the Irish.

The Irish Literary Revival or the Celtic Twilight, as promoted by such writers as William Butler Yeats, Æ Russell, and Edward Plunkett, set itself up as an antidote to modernism, particularly to Anglophone modernism. It suggested in one breath that Irish literature was different from British literature because of the Irish character, spirit, mythology, society, and history, and because English literature had stolen Irish themes and subjects when it made itself (Arthurian legends among them). This dramatic and drastic push away from British literature was necessary even though it was not entirely honest. It

wasn't honest because modernism, as we know, was not the product of cosmopolitan elitists from the cosmopolis nor was T. S. Eliot its only child. Werner Sollors, among others, has shown that modernism, as we know it, was largely an ethnic modernism that drew on many localities and positionalities even if the canon often erased those tracks. Abstract art, art nouveau, Beaux-Arts, epic poetry, architecture, and even fairly taxidermied fields like anthropology drew heavily on Native and tribal cultures—Pablo Picasso's tribal masks, Gertrude Stein's repeating repetitions, and Marcel Proust's spiritualism and the magic of objects all come to mind as obvious and extreme examples of the mixing of experimental and folk forms. But the push away from things British and modern and imperial in Irish poetry, in the Celtic Twilight, was necessary as a way of overcoming the totalizing forces of colonialism and subjugation, as a way of escaping the gravitational field of the canon, of "great literature."

Irish literature came to change from within and without. Yeats is a great example of this—his first poem was consciously and overtly styled on Edmund Spenser and was largely ignored because of its Spenserian underpinnings. It was only with *The Wanderings of Oisín*, published in 1889, a poem that contained obscure Gaelic names and "striking repetitions" interspersed in a popular poetic form, that Yeats got any attention. This tension—between the folk and the tribal and modern and mainstream, the use of "Western" forms and the simultaneous rejection of them, the attention paid to form and mimesis as well as content—should seem familiar to us in the field of Native American studies. It certainly describes things like Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Erdrich's revised *Love Medicine* (2000), as well as Paula Gunn Allen's *Sacred Hoop* (1986).

The anxiety in Irish poetry might be much like our anxiety. Speaking of Mary Antin, Werner Sollors might very well be speaking of all of us in the field of Native American studies: "And does her experience not dramatize the anxiety of many ethnic intellectuals that, in giving up religiously-based maxims of childhood, they might not be joining, on equal footing, an international group of modern, cosmopolitan freethinkers but only ingratiating themselves to the host society's set of superstitions, based on another, an alien religion that merely passes itself off as more 'modern?'" (*Ethnic Modernism*, 2008, 73). Or, perhaps more frightening for the Irish and for us, maybe the fear that undergirded the Celtic Twilight and still informs Native American studies is not so much the fear of sitting at the master's table and ingratiating ourselves there, but a rather more profound fear that we're not guests at the table at all—we've become the hosts and are "other" only in disguise. Might not the anxiety one sees in the Celtic Twilight be the anxiety around the need to produce difference because little exists? Might not the fear be of a cultural twilight? To put it more succinctly, might not the fear and anxiety around the Celtic Twilight and

around the field of Native American studies be one of acculturation? It seems so if only because one so seldom hears that word spoken, much less discussed. These are certainly my fears—I worry about what will happen to me and my people when culture is something we talk about but never do. (It is safe to say that the most important and exciting work coming out of Leech Lake isn't coming from the few of us who teach in the academy and write books; the brightest spot at Leech Lake is the Niigaane Ojibwe language-immersion school; at White Earth it is the resurgence of Big Drum societies; and at Lac Court d'Orielles it is the Waadookodaading Ojibwe immersion school.) Likewise, it saddens me that the discussions in the field around Native literature and “what it all means or should mean” fail to include the very things that make writing special to me: invention, care, precision, imagination, tradition, filiality, and daring.

The field of Irish poetry and criticism seems to have emerged from this crisis. The field matured. The anxiety subsided. They began to critique each other and their shared concerns, and only by doing that kind of cold, hard inventory around issues of culture and expression did the Irish literary tradition give birth to poets like Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon.

So what to make of the “debates” that are defining the field of Native American studies, in particular, Native American literary studies? The proper critical mode and the way to reconcile cosmopolitanism and nationalism might very well be to look to modernism—itself a blend of the two. After all, modernism was a development that foregrounded and thematized form as much as theme; *mimesis* became the watchword, and this aspect of modernism is very much applicable when we consider the genius of *Fool's Crow* (1987), *House Made of Dawn*, *Ceremony* (1977), *Storyteller* (1981), *Love Medicine* (1984), and much of the great literature that followed. But perhaps we need a new kind of modernism to explain ourselves, one in which writers like Momaday, Silko, Erdrich, Welch, Robert Warrior, Jace Weaver, Craig Womack, Arnold Krupat, Kenneth Lincoln, Elvira Pulitano, Owens, and all of us see ourselves and are seen, not as guests at the host's table, to echo Sollors again, but as the true hosts of American literature and criticism welcoming visitors, as we always have, to our shores, imagined and real. It seems, in a newly emergent fourth wave of poetry, that this is happening already; I will get to that in a moment. But before I do, I'd like to suggest that we could see Native American studies as existing in four phases.

As in many things, first there is genesis (which seems to have taken place largely during what Lincoln identified as the Renaissance in Native American literature). Second, in the development of many areas of critical and cultural expression, there is a period of separation—in which the newly emergent genre distances itself from some of its ancestors and claims others—which

seems to have occurred in prose, poetry, and criticism during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. The third step might be seen as evaluation, a colder, more critical moment of self-searching (this doesn't seem to have happened yet in our field). Last, there is judgment—a moment when critics and writers make distinctions rather than assuming difference, evaluate rather than describe, judge rather than proscribe, and one sees the beginning of a real diversity of view.

If any literature survives the middle passage, of separation, of false differences and dissociation, it should consider itself lucky. African American, Asian American, Jewish American, and to some extent Chicano and Latino literature have all made it through. I wonder if we are still in the middle. In Native American literature, it is still somewhat possible to listen to papers and to read articles and monographs wherein books are not even quoted, in which style and structure are rarely in view, and in which the critic almost never evaluates and critiques and the academic's or writer's identity is thoroughly coded in the discussion. It is still possible to read the majority of criticism and theory around Native American literature and find that the literature is almost exclusively treated as representative and reflective (mostly of culture and society coded as "worldview") rather than generative. Vizenor alone seems to be the critic everyone can agree is generative even if they can't understand him, or perhaps that's why there is agreement about his work. *Worldview* and *identity* are words thrown around that stand in for *culture*—but not often is anyone brave (or foolish) enough to actually define culture in a useful way. *Worldview* is a way of evoking culture (and its power) without having to be responsible for it.

This is beginning to change. We are beginning to hear more critical judgments of the work and to entertain serious challenges to the way we've been doing literary (and cultural) business. This moment is hardly comfortable. It is anxious, fraught, and deeply personal.

The anxiety that has, it seems to me, informed the field for twenty years and often involves identity and cultural insecurity is gradually giving way to something else, particularly in the field of poetry. I feel emboldened to make a prediction: just as in the late 1960s, we are at a threshold, at the beginning of a new dawn in Native American studies. I predict that in the next ten years we will witness a "re-renaissance" if you will, a re-rebirth of Native American literature, what Erika Wurth has called a "fourth wave." It is possible to see that moment beginning on the ground in Native communities. If the American Indian Movement (AIM) defined self-expression and political activism in the 1960s and early 1970s, then language and cultural revitalization are the new activism. No longer is activism, as it was with AIM, aimed at expressing ourselves to outsiders in some way in order to feel better about

ourselves. Rather, with the new stresses on aboriginal languages and cultures, communities are turning in to give new life to what has always been ours—our linguistic and cultural patrimony. This is the major and most important development at places like White Earth and Leech Lake reservations in northern Minnesota (and seems from afar to be true of the Hawaiian, Blackfeet, and Navajo communities as well), where language and culture recovery are the most important developments on the ground since John Collier’s “Indian New Deal” and the institution of Indian Reorganization Act governments. It is also possible to see such a fourth wave in the work of a group of younger poets and filmmakers.

Young poets such as Sherwin Bitsui, Erika Wurth, Layli Longsoldier, Sara Ortiz, Orlando White, and Santee Frazier, and filmmakers such as Dallas Goldtooth, Migizi Pensoneau, and Elizabeth Day are making their mark and making it new. They are connected to their communities in ways the generators of the “renaissance” of the 1960s and 1970s were not or could not be. Frazier’s poetry collection, *Dark Thirty* (2009), is radically unanxious about charting, exactly, its relation to Cherokee culture or to the mainstream of American and Anglophone poetry. Bitsui’s two collections—*Shapeshift* (2003) and *Flood Song* (2009)—are a miraculous mix of Navajo and Conrad Aiken; his work untroublingly glides atop both. Their work is replacing the older poets and poetry, much of which is of an “Sherman Alexie-an aspect”: culturally universalist, historically sentimental, and almost pathologically conservative in its iconography (one thinks of disappearing buffalo, painted ponies, and warm Indian blankets). The fourth wave’s departure from the old (but with an embrace of tribal languages not just Indian words, location, and culturally specific iconography as opposed to universalist iconography) is readily apparent in poetry, which always, even now, seems to lead. It is not so obvious in fiction; novels always seem to lag, the lumbering, bourgeois things that they are. Criticism is growing in the wake of both (funny how in writing, the steel point follows the arrow instead of tipping it). Many more critics—students of their language, connected to community and culture but adapted to the diet of academia—are finding ways into literature and life heretofore unexplored.

We are, I strongly believe, on the threshold. We are on the cusp of an explosion of expression and a reinvigoration. No more so than today, here, as we celebrate forty years of American Indian studies at UCLA—together in our differences and radically poised to take American Indian studies (not to mention Native languages and cultures along with it) for another forty-year ride. We are, today, together, witness to the birth of a whole new field in conversation and in play, and for that I am extremely grateful.