

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Introduction

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4q57w6xt>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 4(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Lincoln, Kenneth

**Publication Date**

1980-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# Introduction

KENNETH LINCOLN

---

---

## NATIVE LITERATURES

If literature in any culture, aside from variables of form, is "language charged with meaning," as laid down by Ezra Pound in the *A B C of Reading*:

- Where do we find Native American literatures?
- How do we hear and see and record them?
- How do we bring them back alive from far places?
- How do we translate them, in word and spirit, across cultures?
- How do we witness older oral traditions informing newer writings?
- How do we place these transitions among myths and symbolic forms universal to art?

These questions surfaced in our 1980 American Indian Translation issue, *Word Senders*, Volume 4, Numbers 1-2. The essays here by Dell Hymes on translation, Richard Keeling on field work, James Ruppert on contemporary poets, and Patrick Hubbard on Trickster's comic survival respond in kind, from folklore and linguistics to anthropology and ethno-musicology, from literary criticism and poetic form to comparative mythology and aesthetic theory. The issue also features poems by Paula Gunn Allen from Laguna Pueblo, whose *Shadow Country* will appear this spring as the fifth volume of poetry in our Native American Series, with William Oandasan's *A Branch of California Redwood*, Barney Bush's *My Horse And a Jukebox*, J. Ivaloo Volborth's *Thunder-Root*, and Norman Russell's *indian thoughts* now in print. Whether in the old days or currently, among ethnologists or the tribal elders, two questions resonate on the horizon of these discussions: Who are the Indians of America? Who are their literary artists?

"Indians," or Native Americans, are indigenous peoples to this country, some at least 40,000 years native. Once 4 to 8 million strong, perhaps a sixth in Mendocino and Sonoma counties in northern California,

these peoples were reduced to less than 250,000 by 1900. The rough outlines of this history are commonly known, if ignored; the survivals and continuations of native cultures are little known, less understood. Presently there are over 400 distinct tribes with one and a half million peoples speaking over 200 languages, the most rapidly growing and diverse ethnic peoples in America.

Beyond bloodline, tribe, reservation land, government role, or national movements, being Indian is an idea of oneself, the Kiowa artist N. Scott Momaday holds, a self-realizing act of the imagination, through a taproot into the ancestral past deep in the land. Edgar L. Hewett once wrote with Adolph Bandelier, "The American Indian is doomed, the white race likewise, if its civilization is not rooted in its templed past, and the spirit of its culture kept alive" (*Indians of the Rio Grande Valley*, 1937). In the ancestral stories and songs, and in the emerging written literatures of Native America, to be Indian is to give voice to the essential elements feeding that ancient root and to face the pains and challenges of the present. There are hundreds of tribal and regional and genetic variants, oral tales and urban texts, cross-overs of poetry and prose.

Indian narrative, old and new, is living history, an angle of truth, a belief in people telling their lives in honesty, pride, and beauty. To tell a story in the Indian way, no less to write, is not so much to fictionalize, as to inflect the truth of the old ways still with us ("novel" may suggest making up new, even unreal events, considering that the second definition for storyteller is, euphemistically, "liar" in the Oxford English Dictionary). The Indian storyteller enters the narrative less a point-of-view, detached on the impassive crosshairs of art, more a human presence, attended by an audience taking part in the narrative. The narrator's immediacy is essential to tribal culture, not as product but process.

In company with Franz Boas, Elsie Clews Parsons, Alfred Kroeber, Frank Cushing, Ruth Bunzel, Ruth Underhill, Washington Matthews, Frances Densmore, and Ruth Benedict, among others, Edgar Hewett lived and worked the first third of this century among southwest Indians, to remember: "Those evenings by Pueblo fireplaces were the ethnologist's university courses, especially in fall and winter. Without asking a single question, you heard myth and tradition and folktale from the old men; you got acquainted with the culture heroes; you learned the cosmography; you found that every hill and mesa and beast and breed of humanity had its place in the Indian's world, with combination of nature and human spirit. The young men softened buckskin, cut and sewed or mended moccasins, ground and perforated shells for beads, traded jokes. Women stirred strange food mixtures; rolled out *piki* bread on stone slabs; shifted the drying fruits; girls giggled and children snoozed by the fire." The old

ones speak here from the center, the ancestral regard for traditional ways stemming from the Indian elders so active in child-raising, listened to as cultural purveyors, consulted at the heart of tribal affairs. Their words voice and give shape to tribal identity. Their memories carry good medicine. By custom wise and aged relatives, the cumulative life of tribal tellers fleshes them in story.

In our common language, story once meant history, learning by inquiry; *histo-* derives from the Greek for "tissue." This connective sense of the elders talking knowledgeably, in person, to relatives who care infuses the writing of younger Indians today. Simon Ortiz regards language as "a way of life," not just a tool, "a trail which I follow in order to be aware as much as possible of what is around me and what part I am in that life."

"I never decided to become a poet. An old-man relative with a hump-back used to come to our home when I was a child, and he would carry me on his back. He told stories. My mother has told me that. That contact must have contributed the language of myself" (*The Man To Send Rain Clouds*). A story-backed old-man relative to touch and carry a child for his life: words incarnate, flesh-and-blood story ties, an embodied imagination, and all natural and immediate as a boy's memory. Leslie Silko remembers her grandmother out watering morning glories and telling her, as first memories, Laguna stories (*Ceremony*). Scott Momaday perches on his Kiowa grandmother's back in a family photograph of Aho in *The Names*. Alfonso Ortiz tells childhood stories of leading his blind grandfather through standing rainwater at San Juan Pueblo.

Indian artists are "the people," as over 100 tribes name themselves, and their art is accessible to all people. They live by the word, by visions of truth, by the healing powers of images, by a belief in ceremony and ritual and the living past, by a trust in natural forms, by a regard for the old and new stories, by reciprocal responsibilities to tribe, tradition, ancestral place and past, wherever one's people are found, in country or city now, suburb, cow town, or farming community. Within this, being Indian is one's idea and definition of self, a choice, a commitment, an active participation in *being* Indian.

Until less than 20 years ago, there were no Indian poets in print. Now there are hundreds in anthologies: *The Way* (1971), *From the Belly of the Shark* (1973), *Come to Power* (1974), *Voices from Wah'Kon-Tah* (1974), *Carriers of the Dream Wheel* (1975), *Voices of the Rainbow* (1975), *The Remembered Earth* (1979), *The Third Woman* (1980), to name but half. This is indeed an emergence, a renaissance of Indian cultural voices, an awakening from oral traditions to the printed word, begun in tribal

newspapers and journals and small press chapbooks. The more well known of several hundred poets—Scott Momaday, Peter Blue Cloud, Wendy Rose, Anita Endrezze-Danielson, Ray Young Bear, Roberta Hill, James Welch, Leslie Silko—are, in Momaday's fine words in "Carriers of the Dream Wheel"

... old in their voices,  
 And they carry the wheel among the camps,  
 Saying: Come, come,  
 Let us tell the old stories,  
 Let us sing the sacred songs.

The idiomatic voices of 'Skins, bloods and breeds, from all parts of America, are gathering in essay, play, fiction, prose poem, free verse, and rhymed, metered poetry, as their ancestors danced, sang, prayed, orated, made medicine, talked, and told old stories.

It is not easy. James Welch opens a poem about Montana Blackfeet "Surviving":

The day-long cold hard rain drove  
 like sun through all the cedar sky  
 we had that late fall. We huddled  
 close as cows before the bellied stove.  
 Told stories.

But the stories and songs heal wounds of the spirit, mind, and body. The Oneida, Roberta Hill, tells us in "Leap in the Dark,"

Truth waits in the creek, cutting the winter brown hills:  
 it sings of its needles of ice, sings because of the scars.

It is this vision of truth still through the seasons, singing true wounds that will heal, that stays the heart of native literatures, past and present.

"It will take a long time, but the story must be told," the Storyteller prophesies through Leslie Silko. "There must not be any lies."