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New Interpretations of Native American Literature: A Survival Technique

GALEN BULLER

Although recently some material has been published on the relationship between Western theories of literary criticism and Native American literature in general (oral traditions more specifically), little has been written about that same relationship specific to contemporary written Native American literature. Vine Deloria's chapter "Indians in America," in *God is Red*, is useful in reiterating all the basic assumptions that have formed a basis for defining contemporary written American Indian literature: that it be both by and about American Indians, that it be sensitive to the traditional aspects of native populations, and that it include as part of its definition a relationship with an ongoing oral tradition as well. This position has been expanded through well-written articles by Sayre, Lewis, and Evers.[1] None of these deals at any length, however, with a methodological approach to the criticism of this literature.

This past fall, I again taught a course in contemporary written American Indian literature in which I spent a substantial amount of time dealing with the literature written by N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Silko. In thinking about what both Momaday and Silko have to say about the art of storytelling, I discovered that the working definition, as presented by Deloria and others, is valid as far as it goes and helpful particularly to the critic or teacher interested in comparative literature, but it does not adequately represent the underlying attitudes that make this literature as American Indian literature unique. Because of the diverse nature of the American Indian population, it is difficult to generalize about the nature of this literature; still, in looking at this material with the perspectives presented by Silko, Momaday, and others, certain

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patterns do seem to emerge, suggesting a uniqueness to most, if not all, of the written American Indian literatures.

It is imperative, I believe, for teachers to try to look at this literature in new ways. American Indian literature is something unique, and, as such, should be taught as something distinctive from American literature written by non-Indian authors. The traditions from which it originates are different. The way words are perceived and used, structural devices employed, and philosophical perceptives of the world envisioned is different to the extent that it may be well for the teacher of this literature not to attempt criticism according to traditional methodology. There is a need, if not for a new theory of criticism, at least for new perceptions of existing critical theory, made applicable to contemporary American Indian writers. This is most important for the student in that it offers alternative approaches in understanding a distinctive literature.

In defining the literature, it might be useful if the term "Indian" be defined first. In light of what both Momaday and Silko write about Indianness, the best definition is one given by Momaday himself in his article, "The Man Made of Words." In answer to the question, "What is an American Indian?", he replies:

> The answer of course is that an Indian is an idea which a given man has of himself. And it is a moral idea, for it accounts for the way in which he reacts to other men and to the world in general. And that idea, in order to be realized complete, has to be expressed.[2]

While not denying the ethnicity and the uniqueness of being Indian, Momaday emphasizes not the degree of blood but the moral values a person holds, as exhibited particularly through that person's own recognition of the power of his language, of the power of his affiliation with a sense of place, and of the importance of racial memory. The usefulness and power of these recognitions are invalid, however, unless that person fully has the ability to express these moral ideas, these feelings that he shares; he, in essence, must allow these thoughts to form and maintain a close-knit community in a specific place.

In defining the American Indian, Momaday has also defined American Indian literature. In a nutshell, the literature is that expression of a person which enables that person to "realize completely" the moral idea that has made him and continues to make him an American Indian. It is a sorting out, a searching for, an answer to that old question "Who am I?" and finding answers inside the self, at a specific place and with a community of other people who are in many ways alike. The literature, then, may well be defined by a description of several attributes: a reverence for

words; a sense of place; a feeling for and participation in ritual, something Leslie Silko has called "ceremony" (which might accurately be called psycho-therapy, an affirmation of the need for community); and an affirmation that there exists uniquely Indian assumptions about the nature of the universe. Although these concepts are interrelated, and do not function as individual entities, they can nevertheless be identified as forming the structural and thematic foundation that must constitute a contemporary Indian literature, and upon which any valid criticism of this literature may be made.

For the traditional storyteller, the word was and is considered sacred. The word creates. It is no different for the creative contemporary writer. Gerald Vizenor says in *Wordarrows*:

> . . . Creative writers find words in colors, soaring birds, flowers in the sun, wine at night. The speaker is not the center of the world because words were on the earth before the talkers and tellers.[3]

The good storyteller is cognizant of the fact that he does not create words to relay his story, but rather he discovers the words which have already created a story. This is essentially the way in which Betonie cures Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony*. Together, and with the help of the ritual, they discover Tayo's story, his life, something that has always been available for him, though not recognized. And words are not spoken apart from meaning because all words create meaning; if the words are used without thought, they create chaos. Vizenor continues:

> The birds knew how to sing from the wind that shaped their wings in flight. Like fish out of water, white people spoke words out of meaning. No wonder the white world needed word hospitals . . .[4]

This attitude makes Indian literature unique, if not from non-Indian poets, at least from the general public's "Mad Avenue" approach to the use of words. For the Indian writer, the word—sacred—not only functions as a vehicle for thoughts and images, forming and defining the literature, but creating the author as well.

It is apparent that for Momaday the man is defined through his words, his language. For him, and it would seem for the contemporary Indian writer in general, the word is self-activating and self-actualizing. By way of synopsis, he writes in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*:

> A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things. By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred.[5]

And he elaborates in "Man Made of Words"::

> . . .man has consummate being in language, and there only. The state of human *being* is an idea, an idea which man has of himself. Only when he is embodied in an idea, and the idea is realized in language, can man take possession of himself.[6]

And finally, he suggests in *House Made of Dawn* that the silence between words is as full of meaning—and as sacred—as the words themselves are. What is not said is as important as what is.

To this Paula Gunn Allen, in her article, "The Sacred Hoop," adds:

> The artistry of the tribes is married to the essence of language itself, for in language we seek to share our being with that of the community, and thus to share in the communal awareness of the tribe. In this art the greater self and all-that-is are blended into a harmonious whole, and in this way the concept of being that is fundamental and sacred spring of life is given voice and being for all.
>
> The Indian does not content himself with simple preachments of this truth but through the sacred pose of utterance he seeks to shape and mold, to direct and determine the forces that surround and govern our lives and that of all things.[7]

This perception of the word is the uniting factor; a reverence for it is basic to the formulation of a unique American Indian literature. But, as both the excerpts by Momaday and Allen point out quite clearly, the word does not stand by itself. Allen links the word to community; Momaday links it to the land. To both, however, articulation is an essential ingredient of being.

In a paper presented at a recent Rocky Mountain Language Association Conference in Phoenix, Allen presents another aspect of the contemporary literature.

> We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea of Native American life: the land and the people are the same. . .The earth is the source and the being of the People and the People are equally the being of the earth. . .The earth is not the ever dead Other which supplies us with a sense of *I* by virtue of its unbeing; rather it is being, as we are, as all that springs from the land is being, aware, palpable, alive.[8]

If, in fact, we accept the premise that the People and the Land are one, and if we accept Momaday's notion that literature defines through expression the Native American peoples, then it logically follows that

Indian literature cannot be defined apart from the land. This is the underlying notion that unifies Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. In his own criticism of the work, Momaday talks about a land ethic and its morality.

> None of us lives apart from the land entirely; such an isolation is unimaginable. We have sooner or later to come to terms with the world, not only as it is revealed to us immediately through our senses; but also as it is perceived more truly in the long turn of seasons and of years. And we must come to moral terms. There is no alternative, I believe, if we are to realize and maintain our humanity; for our humanity must consist in part in the ethical as well as the practical ideal of preservation.[9]

The land is a reality in the physical sense, but beyond that, especially for the Indian writer, the land functions as a moral idea: a starting place, and a uniting force. This same idea, central to Deloria's thinking in his spatial approach to understanding tribal religion in particular and literature by implication, is that literature cannot be separated from its place of origin, its geographical birthplace, without a consequential loss of impact. Even a cursory reading of *Ceremony*, *House Made of Dawn*, or *Winter in the Blood* points out, I feel, the truth in that statement. I cannot imagine any of these apart from their place of origin. Although this "sense of place," as D.H. Lawrence has referred to it, is not unique to American Indian literature, American Indian literature is uniquely dependent upon the land.

In *The Names* Momaday helps clarify the distinctions between what place might mean to a non-Indian writer. He says, in part:

> There are many levels to the land, and many colors. You are drawn into it, down and away. You see the skyline, and you are there at once in your mind, and you have never been there before. There is no confinement, only wonder and beauty.[10]

The key to this is his comment, "There is no confinement." Place doesn't restrict him, but rather functions as an impetus. It doesn't define him, but broadens his ability to imagine and thus create.

Eudora Welty outlines a fairly non-Indian response to this in her article "Place in Fiction," where she describes place as:

> . . . the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress. Location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling, as feeling about history partakes of place.[11]

The place of which Welty speaks is one upon which we are forced to superimpose our imagination. It functions as a boundary; it ultimately confines. Momaday feels with the land; Welty feels about the land.

And through the literature this land becomes more than just the physical land. It becomes, as Barbara Strelke calls it in her article on Momaday, "a remarkable destination. A place where one can learn to experience his own cure."[12] It is to this place that Abel returns at the end of *House Made of Dawn*, and that Tayo returns to at the end of *Ceremony*, and that Liz Sohappy talks about in her poem, "Once Again." An excerpt from that poem reads as follows:

> Moisten your lips
> loosen your tongue,
> let the chant echo
> from the desert, to valley, to peak—
> wherever your home may be.
>
> Remember the smoke,
> the chants, the drums,
> the stick grandfather held
> as he spoke in the dark
> of the power of his fathers.
>
> Gather your memories into a
> basket, into a pot
> into your cornhusk bag, and
> grandfather is alive
> for us to see once again.[13]

Liz Sohappy's poem directs its attention to another aspect central to contemporary American Indian literature, thus again showing the relationships between these attributes. In this case, she relates the land to the chants. The memories and the power that is her grandfather's, and that comes from her grandfather's "home," is hers, particularly as a writer today. It is a recognition that contemporary literature is not entirely new, that it has a relationship with the past, with oral traditional material. The new stories are the old stories, as Silko implies, in her short story, "Yellow Woman." In that story Silva recognizes that he is reliving an old Pueblo story and assures his friend, a woman who is not sure whether she is herself or a figure out of the old stories about Yellow Woman, that "someday they will talk about us, and they will say, 'Those two lived long ago when things like that happened.'"[14] These contemporary episodes are reenactments of the old Katsina stories.

In her novel, *Ceremony*, Silko is even more explicit. Thematically the novel centers around the need for a curing ritual on the part of the protagonist, Tayo. Betonie, the old medicine man, is the only medicine man who is powerful enough and who also understands the needs of people like Tayo—those who have left the reservation and have been contaminated by the "witchery." In one way Tayo's needs are different from those of the Traditional Pueblo peoples; and yet, in another, because Tayo is Pueblo, they are also the same. Betonie recognizes that gradual changes are necessary for the ceremonies to survive, continuing to supply cures for the needy people. Betonie shows Tayo his story and performs a ceremony that essentially helps Tayo understand this story created out of words not yet spoken. In a larger sense, the novel is Silko's and our story. She begins her novel with a poem:

CEREMONY

I will tell you something about stories
(he said)
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.

Their evil is mighty
but it can't stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten
They would like that
They would be happy

Because we would be defenseless then.

He rubbed his belly.
I keep them here
(he said).

Here, put your hand on it
See, it is moving.
There is life here
for the people.

And in the belly of this story
the rituals and the ceremony
are still growing.[15]

Truly American Indian contemporary literature, like its oral counterpart, would be psychotherapeutic. Much as the traditional oral literature was never perceived as apart from the religion, the morality, the ethics of the community, the truly contemporary Indian literature is integrative, attempting to bring a sense of direction through ceremony, through ritual. Besides the obvious example in *Ceremony*, two others come quickly to mind: Ben Benally in *House Made of Dawn*, and a poem by James Welch, "In My Lifetime."

Even though for Ben Benally the city of Los Angeles was attractive, and the land back home "empty and dead," after Abel gets out of the hospital and decides to go home, Ben retells a dream held by both Abel and himself.

> I prayed. He was going home, and I wanted to pray. Look out for me, I said; look out each day and listen for me. And we were going together on horses to the hills. We were going to see how it was, and always was, how the sun came up with a little wind and the light ran out upon the land. We were going to get drunk, I said. We were going to be all alone, and we were going to get drunk and sing. We were going to sing about the way it always was. And it was going to be right and beautiful. It was going to be the last time. And he was going home.[16]

Momaday suggests through the voice of Ben that the traditional ways do function as a means of salvation for the "marginal man," Abel. And it isn't until Abel is reunited with his homeland, his people, and his religion that he begins to realize who he is. There, ceremony is one of the land, and one of the community, and as such provides his cure, placing Abel ultimately within his grandfather's being, making him a continuation of Francisco.

James Welch too looks to the relationship between a traditional past and the landscape upon which that past was lived in his poem, "In My Lifetime." Part of the poem reads as follows:

> Desparate in my song
> I run these woman hills, translate wind
> to mean a kind of life, the children
> of Speakthunder
> are never wrong and I am rhythm to strong
> medicine.[17]

It is this relationship between the land, the ceremony, and the medicine, linked to the past, that gives strength to contemporary literature that is truly Indian.

For Silko, not only does the theme of *Ceremony* relate to the concept of ceremony, but the structure is, as well, dependent on a kind of ritual scheme. The telling of the story is itself a healing ritual intiated by the Thought Woman who "is sitting in her room / thinking of a story now." Then Silko continues, not only in Betonie's story, but also structurally in the framing of the story around a series of chants. The old songs are either related to Betonie's interpretation of the story, or to Emo's own perverted ceremonies related to the witchery, the negative aspect of the ritual schema. Thematically, it is through the telling of the story that Tayo is cured, but through its structure we as readers are offered an alternative way of looking at the world around us.

Although not all contemporary literature has a structure and thematic content so obviously related to a sense of ceremony as does Silko's novel, a good many do incorporate some aspects related to traditional ritual. It may be something as minor as employing a four part structure in *House Made of Dawn* or *Winter in the Blood*, or it may be more involved, relating to any number of ceremonial cycles. A good example is Duane Niatum's poetic cycle, "Legends of the Moon," in which Niatum not only structures his series of poems, but shares a world-view depicting the way he, as an American Indian, looks at time and the rhythm of the seasons. As is the case with *Ceremony*, structure in Niatum's poetry relates to idea in a traditional way.

By dividing this cycle into twelve poems, each named according to the Assiniboine calendar (with the exception of two, one borrowed from the Lakota, the other from the Lummi), Niatum draws his reader into a traditional view of the emotive powers of the changing year, not divided into the four seasons, but rather constructed into a cyclical pattern, one that is traditionally Indian. It reminds the reader of a winter count, one condensed into a single year, in which feelings, relating to the representative change within the individual, are recorded and shared.

In *God is Red*, Deloria suggests yet another integral part of the contemporary American novel. "The novels make a valiant effort to invoke the feeling of former days of communal integrity and common fate."[18] He continues by saying that, although some contemporary Indian novelists try to invoke the feeling based on times past, they are too far removed to be successful. More successful are the current novelists who affirm the existence of and need for a sense of community as it currently exists among Indian people. The ceremony Silko and others relate to can only work if there is a community for it to function within. And it is a contemporary community that nevertheless holds traditional values. This community is in itself therapeutic, forming the basis for a renewal of Indianness as these modern writers are perceiving it. Tribal community is

and was essential, if not for physical survival, certainly for psychic survival today.

On the one hand, it is perhaps this lack of a sense of community that makes Carlos Castaneda's books seem less Indian. There is an element of rugged individualism in his books that feels far more European than Indian. Many of the best examples of how community is important are found in novels and short stories written since Deloria completed *God is Red*; if one sees written literature as merely an extension, a part of the evolutionary process through which literature must go (Momaday in "Man Made of Words"), then that background of community has been there all along, sometimes more obviously than others. It's there in Simon Ortiz's short story, "The San Francisco Indians," for instance, and in Vizenor's *Wordarrows*, and in Momaday's poetry, and in Silko's work, and these are but a few of the many possible examples. In each of these cases, community is seen as an integral part of an Indian determination for survival.

The common denominator, and the most significant aspect of this definition of contemporary American Indian literature, is explained by Paula Gunn Allen in "The Sacred Hoop":

> Literature is a facet of a culture. Its significance can be best understood in terms of its culture, and its purpose is meaningful only when the assumptions it is based on are understood and accepted. . .It is not much of a problem for the person raised in the culture to see the relevance, the level of complexity, or the symbolic significance of his culture's literature. He is from birth familiar with the assumptions that underlie both his culture and its literature and art.[19]

She continues later:

> . . .American Indian literature is not similar to western literature because the basic assumptions about the universe and, therefore, the basic reality experienced by tribal peoples and westerners are not the same, even at the level of "folk-lore."[20]

Although she is predominately talking about the oral traditional material here, Allen has pointed out something unique and universal within the literature produced by contemporary American Indian writers. The premises of Native American oral literature are fundamentally different in function, style, format, theme and world-view from post-Renaissance western literature; thus the contemporary Indian writer stands with one foot in each of the two literary traditions. It is easy, because of the writer's use of the novel form, and his use of some Americanisms, to read

his entire work as if it were nothing more than American literature written by an Indian. In some cases the literature may be nothing more than that, but in others, the contemporary literature is based on the oral traditional material and the differences are significant.

American Indian literature then differs as a body of literature from American literature in five critical areas: a reverence for words, a sense of place and dependence on that sense, a feeling for a sense of ritual, an affirmation of the need for community, and a significantly different world-view. The effect of a teacher looking at contemporary American Indian literature in this light is, I believe, profound. For the past couple of years I have been teaching a course on American Indian literature to classes of predominately Indian students. Each year, a couple of students suggest that their perception of *Winter in the Blood* is that it is not really Indian literature. Now to say that *The Man Who Killed the Deer* or *Conquering Horse* is not Indian literature is easy, but to say that *Winter in the Blood* is not Indian literature is more difficult, particularly with a definition of this literature at our disposal which suggests that Indian literature is all literature written by and about Indian people. But in looking at this literature as being something more, something with a unique philosophy, background and purpose, we are allowed to make distinctions between American Indian literature and literature written in America by Indian authors. My purpose is not to be critical of *Winter in the Blood*, or label it, but it is important that the student come to grips with the difficulty of criticizing Indian literature by a set of standards relevant specifically to Indian culture. The student may then be able to find reasons why, for instance, most major reviewers of *Winter in the Blood* proclaimed the novel as universal in its impact, and why some AIM members have denounced the book as being non-Indian in nature.[21] It is important, I believe, that methods of criticism be developed that are, at least to an extent, distinct from Western influence. Much has been said about the cultural relationship to oral material, but this discussion needs to be addressed to the written literature as well.

Liz Cook in her article "American Indian Literatures in Servitude" presents the problem in teaching this material, whether it be oral or written:

> . . . the teachers of these courses that are being developed are often vastly ignorant of non-western oral literatures and, conversely, highly skilled in western literary theory which sets up a dichotomy in critical vocabulary as well as in teaching method, taking the literature out of its context and putting it into another. This renders the literature meaningless for all but the intellectually curious.[22]

It is no wonder, then, that Indian students often as not find no relevance in the Indian literature taught in classrooms. It is of particular importance that the non-Indian teacher (as well as the Indian teacher who has had little contact with the traditional material) think through the philosophical and structural differences between Indian and Western literature, and look at it with new perspectives on how the word, the community, and the ceremony work for Native peoples and Native literatures. A new criticism will do little good for the teacher who does not take the time to understand the old world-views.

The usefulness of this analysis, in my impression, is that it gives a handle to students and teachers alike, allowing for the possibility that there may be something unique about American Indian literature that extends beyond the race of the author or the setting or theme of the story. And it is important that these students realize that through literature they can gain self-awareness as Indian people; in literature, a world-view, a lifestyle, and a culture can survive. On an individual scale, it is through the proper use of language and the resulting literature that we find our own means of survival. Momaday probably puts it best in the conclusion of "Man Made of Words." After retelling the story of the arrowmaker who, when threatened by a potential enemy, called out in Kiowa that if he be a friend, he should make himself known. Hearing no response from the intruder, an enemy not able to speak or understand Kiowa, the arrowmaker killed him.

> A final word then, on an essential irony which marks the story and gives peculiar substance to the man made of words. The storyteller is nameless and unlettered. From one point of view we know very little about him . . . But from another, that is all we need to know. He tells us of his life in language, and of the awful risk involved. It must occur to us that he is one with the arrowmaker and that he has survived, by word of mouth, beyond other men . . . for the arrowmaker, language represented the only chance of survival. It is worth considering that he survives in our time, and that he has survived over a period of untold generations.[23]

For Momaday, for Silko, for all Indian writers, and for all Indian people, there must come the valid recognition that survival is available through a continuation of the ongoing literary traditions.

NOTES

1. See Robert F. Sayre, "A Bibliography and an Anthology of American Indian Literature," *College English* (March 1974): 704-706; Robert W. Lewis,

"English and American Indian Studies," *Indian Historian* (Fall 1973): 32-37, 54; and Lawrence Evers, "Native American Oral Literatures in the College English Classroom: An Omaha Example," *College English* (February 1975): 649-62.

2. N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Made of Words," in *Literature of the American Indians: Views and Interpretations,* ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library 1975), p. 97.

3. Gerald Vizenor, *Wordarrows: Indians and Whites in the New Fur Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1978), p. 94.

4. Vizenor, p. 94.

5. N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (New York: Ballentine Books 1969), p. 42.

6. Momaday, "Man Made of Words," p. 104.

7. Paula Gunn Allen, "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective on American Indian Literature," in *Literature of the American Indians,* ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library 1975), p. 113.

8. Paula Gunn Allen, "The Psychological Landscape of *Ceremony*" a paper presented at the Rocky Mountain Language Association in Phoenix, Arizona, October 1978, p. 10.

9. Momaday, "Man Made of Words," p. 101.

10. N. Scott Momaday, *The Names* (New York: Harper & Row 1976), p. 28.

11. Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," *South Atlantic Quarterly* (January 1956): 57-72.

12. Barbara Strelke, "N. Scott Momaday: Racial Memory and Individual Imagination," in *Literature of the American Indian,* ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library 1975), p. 357.

13. Liz Sohappy, "Once Again," in *I am the Fire of Time,* ed. Jane B. Katz, (New York: E.P. Dutton 1977), p. 153.

14. Leslie Silko, "Yellow Woman," in *The Man to Send Rain Clouds: Contemporary Stories by American Indians,* ed. Kenneth Rosen (New York: Viking Press 1974), p. 37.

15. Leslie Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking Press 1977), p. 2.

16. N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: New American Library 1968), p. 172.

17. James Welch, *Riding the Earthboy 40* (New York: Harper and Row 1976), p. 27.

18. Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1973), p. 53.

19. Allen, "Sacred Hoop," p. 111.

20. Allen, "Sacred Hoop," p. 112.

21. For more on Welch, see Alan R. Velie, "James Welch's Poetry," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 3(1), (1979): 19-38.

22. Liz Cook, "American Indian Literatures in Servitude," *Indian Historian* 10 (Winter 1977): 3.

23. Momaday, "Man Made of Words," p. 110.

so fresh to walk in dawn's early light

after a long, cold and fearful night