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Looking at "GRAIL": A Survey of Recent German  
Research in American Indian Literature



## LITERATURE

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More than the success of any single book including Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning *House Made of Dawn*, Harper & Row's Native American Literature program in the mid-1970s served as an immediate means to convince critics to set SAIL, meaning: to get started into the new academic field of Studies in American Indian Literature.

Many of the critical articles written during the first decade were romantic and uncritical. Yet they served the purpose of forming and—loosely—defining the field of research (note that the first and foremost task of any institution is to ensure and justify its own existence). This included historical research to recover a number of earlier authors of Indian descent that had been out of print for decades and otherwise would have been forgotten. Native American literature was written backwards into existence.

One of the first German contributions was an article on James Welch's poetry by Roswith von Freydorf (1975) who also translated *Winter in the Blood*. At the same time, teachers and scholars of American Literature at German universities like Konrad Groß (whose 1981 lecture on "Modern American Indian Literature" triggered this author's interest), Hartmut Lutz, Wolfgang Kloß, Helmbrecht Breinig, Heiner Bus, and others started "smoothing the ground" for German students and scholars by teaching Native American literature. Bernd Peyer's contributions (1982a, 1989) in particular served "to map out territory." His thesis on Storm's *Seven Arrows* was the first book-length discussion of any single Indian author's work (Peyer 1979). Peyer also was the first to draw attention to Native authors of the 18th and 19th century, Samson

Occom and William Apes (Peyer 1982b, 1984).

As in North America, some early articles and papers showed a tendency to romanticize the authors and the "Indianness" of their works in both form and content. As a political statement to set Native literature apart from the maelstrom mainstream, this was understandable. The literatures of other ethnic minorities received the same treatment. In the long run, however, it became obvious that creating new reservations for minority literatures would eventually create new problems.

Over the last couple of years there has been a marked increase in the amount of research in American Indian literature done and published by German scholars. The fact is of no particular interest, but some of these publications signal a shift in perspective which will hopefully stimulate further research. The tendency is away from supportive praise. Praising ethnic literature for ethnicity's sake as well as the lack of attention by the critical mainstream has in the past created a situation for Native American and Native Canadian literature bordering on ghettoization. Native American publishers and critical newsletters devoted to Indian literature and affairs today provide an established market for their product. This is a remarkable achievement, only that the produced literature keeps revolving around itself while being left out of the literary canon.

Earlier works anticipated the present situation in Germany: Brigitte Georgi's *Der Indianer in der amerikanischen Literatur* (1982) treated Native American literature rather cautiously and always with an eye on Charles Larson's *American Indian Fiction* (1978), the only extensive volume of criticism for an unfortunately long period. In the 1986 publication of her Ph.D. dissertation, however, the same author approached Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* more self-as-

surely: the one and only negative thing to be said about this sober, critical, and profound investigation is that there is no English language edition of it. The main point of interest in the context of this essay is that Georgi-Findlay not only discussed the aboriginal roots of Momaday's works, but also pointed out where he deviated, as well as some of the Anglo-American literary influences. However, a somewhat related attempt to interpret Momaday's works against the background of his non-Native sources by Matthias Schubnell (1985) at the time of its publication met the strong disapproval of some American critics.

The only other substantial doctoral thesis to date, "*Today Talks in Yesterday's Voice*" (Zwillus 1989) replaces Larson. The author combines structural analyses with interpretations of nine major novels by "veteran" authors Momaday, Silko, and Welch (2), promising newcomers Erdrich and Hale, and some of the (undeservedly) neglected: Gerald Vizenor and Paula Gunn Allen. The book provides a survey particularly for students without previous knowledge of the subject. Detailed interpretations of the individual novels are helpful as an introduction to structurally difficult works such as Vizenor's *Bearheart* or a novel deeply involved with specifically Keresan themes and myths like Silko's *Ceremony*. A drawback is that Zwillus does not seem to always grasp the manifold political hints and implications pervading the novels. She qualifies them as more or less "Indian"—which brings us all the way back to square one. On few occasions (like her carefully balanced conclusions) Zwillus calls attention to parallels between Native and non-Native authors, but most interpretations remain immanently focused on the text under investigation.

The same subject that Zwillus turned into an extensive investigation of eight authors, Gudrun Schindler

(1988) tried to squeeze into one article. The immediate question—how much and exactly how little information does it take to convey a picture of the contemporary Native American novel without leaving out too much and without severe distortions—is answered gracefully. Despite its brevity, the survey gives the impression of extensive information, compressed but still legible. Schindler starts with a run-on survey of novels by several Native authors before she focuses on the three most well known—Momaday, Silko, and Welch. She also points out that readers must keep in mind that what she calls the “Indian substratum” and the Euroamerican literary “superstratum” both go into the novels. Whereas it seems somewhat questionable whether these archaeological terms are correctly applied here, Schindler starts to disentangle the Native American novel from the “oral” connection. Also, contemporary modern and postmodern literature in English is far more important an influence on Native authors than the Native *literary* tradition for the simple reason that the early novels by Pokagon, Matthews, or even McNickle were not available. Whether or not these early works should rightfully be called “literature of alienation” (Lutz 1989) must be left open here, but because of their inavailability and the absence of a historical connection they clearly do not stand in a “historical position between the oral tradition and modern literature.”

This assumed connection between Native fiction and tribal oral tradition is one of the major problems critics encounter. Hardly a Native author of the present has failed to claim an oral background to his or her own work. In any other case, authors' claims and statements would be critically taken apart. On several occasions—Jamake Highwater comes to mind—too much credit has been given in the past to authors' statements about their links with the aboriginal traditions. Contemporary authors like Vizenor and Erdrich have turned this new stereotype into a language game already, others like Welch and Momaday have long liberated themselves from a narrow understanding of the oral tradition though they so far avoid the reprimands Chuck Storm encountered with *Seven Arrows*. The use of orality and the oral tradition is but one of many literary techniques and special effects a contemporary author may take recourse to. With their use of oral material and of narrative techniques and

motifs from the oral tradition, modern Native American literature forms a group of liminal texts within the larger context of North American literature in English. Hartwig Isernhagen (1986) has pointed out this aspect with reference to Gerald Vizenor, and Konrad Groß's articles on Momaday and Silko explore some of the technicalities of “orality” in the literary text as well as the implications of its use in the framework of modern narrative: “Although Silko has realized the need for the survival of what is left of oral traditions, she is conscious that the mixed character of her reading public (both Natives and whites) together with the radically changed social and cultural environment demands more than a simple recourse to, and reproduction of, oral traditions” (Groß 1990a). In a similar way, Georgi-Findlay (1990) stresses the parallel use of the traditional circular form of narrative and of Faulknerian allusions in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. The volume this article appeared in (Karrer and Lutz 1990) is an important contribution to the field of research in “Minority Literatures” in general. Even though it appears questionable whether “outside categories” applied to literary texts do necessarily “bear the danger of . . . marginalizing” more than the cultural solipsism practiced by some literary circles inside the minority groups, there can be no doubt but that it is “illuminating to listen to what people say about themselves” (Karrer and Lutz 1990:12). The introductory chapter to the volume is a comprehensive and dense study of the social, political, and economical conditions for the production and reception of minority literatures. Going back to the programmatic texts of the 1960s, the authors sum up developments as well as point out the changing context and perspective of minority literatures in the historical process.

Another advantage of this volume is that Indian, Inuit, and Métis authors are all included alongside Chicanos, Blacks, and Asian Americans, but treated not as one unit but separately—as they rightfully should be. The Métis in particular finally receive some of the attention they deserve: Wolfgang Klooß in his essay draws attention away from the “oral” background of Native literature, pointing out how Native literacy and literature reaches back into the 18th century. Focusing on the autobiographical works of Maria Campbell and Beatrice Culetton, he shows clearly how the Canadian Métis of French, Scottish, and

Indian ancestry have a separate identity as a cultural and ethnic group, but also how through their experience as a mixedblood people, they are again an integral part of the North American Native population. Likewise, Manfred Moßmann's (1990) contribution on the poetry of Louis Riel sharpens the reader's awareness of the “otherness” of Métis cultural heritage.

The decrease of self-consciousness and romanticism in dealing with Native American literature that is apparent in the books and articles by Groß, Georgi-Findlay, Klooß, and Schindler points ahead into the future. If ethnic literatures (read: authors) are to establish themselves as part of a wider literary canon, the whole scale of criticism other established works of poetry or prose have long been subjected to can and rightfully should be applied to them. For example: within a literary text, “orality” is only one of the many instruments and possibilities an author may choose to achieve his or her aim.

This does not imply that criticism focused on the inherently tribal or “oral” aspects of Native American texts is less true or will in the future be superfluous. Some authors like Wendy Rose and Paula Gunn Allen have received little attention in the past (cf. Hermann 1990a, 1990b), and there is the whole field of Native Canadian literature yet to be discovered. Here Hartmut Lutz, currently teaching in Saskatchewan and preparing a volume of interviews with Native Canadian and Métis authors, is leading the way again.

By comparison, European critics are at an advantage when it comes to criticizing ethnic literatures. They are less directly involved in the American literary market. Unfavorable criticism by North Americans is more likely to get brushed off as yet another neo-colonialist attempt to denigrate ethnic writing. There is also a danger that favorable criticism is maybe even unconsciously used as a belated means of compensation. In the long run, however, constant praise is as dishonest. A flawed novel is a flawed novel. Native American literature needs no sympathy but a kind of literary attention that will point at its strong as well as its weak points. The works of Ortiz, Momaday, Silko, Vizenor, Welch, Erdrich, and others will sustain probing.

At the same time, Native American critics from the U.S. and Canada are called upon to enter into the discussion. If by general consent literary criticism of liminal texts and minority lit-

eratures is to be continued for a longer period of time, its theoretical and methodical instruments will need some overhauling. African writers and critics have to some extent already pointed out the general direction: A critical discussion of texts from the new English literatures can only gain from an active participation of the respective groups and nations in the generation and development of the critical apparatus applied to these texts.

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