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‘Native American literature’: developments, contexts and problems

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'Native American Literature': Developments, Contexts and Problems

The impact of political and sociocultural multiculturalism has brought to us a number of apparently diverse minority literatures - texts written by members of different ethnic, religious, or other groups.

Now obviously the very term 'minority literatures' implies the continued existence of a larger majority plus its literature, and it is indeed worthwhile discussing whether this is still the case. I have the feeling that it is, but I cannot go into any detail here concerning questions of open vs. closed literary canon or canon deconstruction. I want to approach the problem from a different point of view by looking at the historical developments, the contexts, and some of the problems of that body of texts usually referred to as Native American Literature - but this very term is already the point where our troubles start, since on this, the Canadian side of the border, the term most commonly used seems to be Canadian Native Literature.

Should, then, a critic deal with U.S. and Canadian Indian literatures independently, or should they qua bloodline be treated together? And if we answer that question affirmatively, how, then, are we to deal with the substantial number of people of indigenous ancestry who will readily respond to being called Diné, Anishinaabeg, Mi'kmaq, or Ganienkehhaga but who will refuse to be labelled 'Indians'?

We ought not to forget that the very term 'Indian' (including the more

politically correct 'Native American' which does not cease to be a euphemistic newspeak version of the old term because it is more politically correct) has come to us from the darkest days of colonial rule. The 'Indian' tag was put on more than 600 different tribes, all speaking different languages and belonging to possibly as many as five different ethnic groups, of which only the Inuit, through a freak accident in the history of European ethnography, came to be listed separately.

If there is, or rather if there appears to be today just one authentic Native American voice, and that voice speaking in English, it comes as the result of a political and linguistic colonial process which forged metatribal commonality out of tribal differences. Contrary to common opinion, these many different nations and tribal groups do not share in only one common cultural concept or metaphysical belief system either. Europeans are probably a more homogeneous lot.

Also, we need to keep in mind that the forged union of Native North American Aboriginal Literature is largely a result of its situation on the bookmarket. Texts in European languages — besides in English, Aboriginal authors have written, of course, in French, but also in Spanish, German, Latin, and classic Greek — have in the past mostly been written for a non-Aboriginal majority market, the demands of which in turn shaped much of what is preceived of today as genuinely Aboriginal in the literary text.

To wit: I am not speaking here about the original tribal literatures, secular or sacred. They are alive in continuing traditions, in their own tongues and times, and the written Aboriginal literatures are neither a replacement nor a continuation of the oral tribal traditions. They are at best complementary as well as complimentary, adding to the cultural range and experience of tribal communities. I shall return to this last point again later.

As I said, it is or at least it was mostly the non-Aboriginal market that indigenous North American authors wrote for. The term 'Native American Literature,' however, was not used before N.Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1968 for *House Made of Dawn*. In fact, so little was known about authors of Native descent before 1960 that Momaday's novel was repeatedly referred to as the "first Native American novel" until somebody figured out that there might have been others before. After that, scholars and critics started to search for the Native author in history, and the tag of the 'first novel' has since been tugged upstream to presently dock at John Rollin Ridge's *Life of Joaquin Murieta*, the Celebrated California Bandit. Published originally in 1854, Murieta is a rather tacky piece of Romantic cloak-and-dagger fiction, and Aboriginal people appear in it only as rather ridiculous stone-age people, the Digger Indians - a derogatory term for the Coastal Miwok. A deadly blow for Indian enthusiasts who want to read and interpret a politically correct message into the novel that simply isn't there. It is true that on other occasions Ridge pleaded with his fellow citizens of California to let the Digger Indians

live, to treat them like human beings — but it is as true that he as an educated upper middle class Cherokee would probably have crossed himself if anyone had suggested that he shared the same status with the poor and hunted Miwoks.

The pan-Indian commonality of the 20th century, is very much a creation / invention of this century. Have a look at all the failed and abortive attempts to rally intertribal alliance to oppose the advent of White settlers and military during the settlement period (Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*).

However, if we still want to attempt a cursory survey of Aboriginal North American texts and authors, the best and most conservative way to do it is probably still to proceed chronologically, starting with the earliest texts. We should however avoid the common notion that chronological succession equals linkage. In fact, most Native American literary texts before the early 1900s could not possibly have had a literary historical influence on each other, for the simple reason that they were mutually unavailable for the respective authors.

The first literary text in the more limited sense of the word comes to us in a letter of praise for an English nobleman who financially supported the Indian school at Harvard. Yes, Harvard - a short-lived school, which was open only between 1656 and 1675 designed to educate the sons of Aboriginal chiefs and leaders of the communities, in order to win them over to Christianity, read: to the side of the colonists. The same colonial practice was used by the French Jesuits, but with more success: Harvard turned out only one graduate, the very Caleb Cheeshateaumauk who is the author of the said letter. Most of his fellow students either deserted the school or died of unfamiliar diseases and bad food.

The letter is an unmitigated praise for the colonial effort, and Caleb prays that it will help to upgrade his own savage kinsmen from the state of ignorance of God and the Scriptures, using as a comparative parable the myth of Orpheus whose civilized song tamed the very animals of the forest, and he says of his compatriots that, like wild animals, they need to be caught and — literally — dragged to their happiness (Hochbruck/Dudensing-Reichel, 1992).

One easy way to interpret away the denigrating and racist discourse of this letter is to say that it was probably dictated. Some misspellings and some uncertainties surrounding the text seem to indicate this possibility. Also, the education at Harvard must have come close to a thorough brainwashing for those who went through it. Another conclusion to be drawn, however, is that a certain blood percentage — Caleb was a full-blood Natick, son of a Sachem — does not automatically secure certain attitudes towards mankind, nature, the ecological system etc. which we have been told by numerous publications over the past few decades to believe are 'Indian.'

Having said that, I hope you will allow me an excursion into the present. Most of you will have read Black Elk Speaks (Neihardt 1932), one of those popular 1960s books which allegedly told the truth in genuine Indian wisdom. However, the author of this book, which appeared first in 1932 was not the old Lakota Holy Man Nicholas Black Elk, but John Gneisenau Neihardt, poeta

laureatus of Nebraska, of German descent and a fan of Richard Wagner. His role in the shaping of Black Elk Speaks had been underestimated for a long time before Raymond de Mallie published Neihardt's original notes in *The Sixth Grandfather* (DeMallie 1986). It turned out that in the very book which the Dakota Vine Deloria (otherwise a lawyer and competent essayist) had called "the Indian Bible" (Deloria 1984, p.14), Neihardt interpreted much of what he had heard from Black Elk to fit his own world view — which was shaped by the bible and Nordic mythology. Small wonder the book sold so well in Germany. There is some irony in the fact that generations of non-Native but also of Native readers read the text believing it to convey a true Indian concept of the world, when in fact it was at best part Lakota and part Germanic.

One problem with this text now is that if Native authors quote Black Elk, are they quoting an appropriated voice now? For Neihardt did no doubt appropriate at least some of old man Black Elk's voice, adding another such case to a long list of texts purportedly written by indigenous North Americans. One early example on my list is a letter by "Yariza, an Indian maiden" (Smith, 1752) to the ladies of New York, pleading for institutions for Indian education — another letter asking for financial support, only that this time and because of the purported author's name I am quite sure that the text is a fabrication — 'Inkle and Yariko' was a popular contemporary dramolette about a British sailor who sold the woman who saved him into slavery. (Ligon, 1657, p.55) There are several versions of the story — a German long poem, an opera — and Yariko is usually depicted as Indian which in this definition includes Carribean. In one version she is black (Colman, 1787).

One thing to keep in mind about the fake Yariza - letter, however, is that there was a colonial demand for educated model Indians whose example could be used to show that a) Indians weren't treated all that badly (or, rather, not all Indians were treated badly) and b) that they could be bettered through education. Seen in this light, the sales success of Samson Occom's *Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul* (Occom, 1771) does not come as a surprise. First published in 1771, it saw 21 reeditions before the end of the century. The topic of the sermon was an admonition against the use of alcohol. As a matter of fact, alcohol abuse and criminal acts committed under the influence of alcohol has been one of the three central topics that keep reappearing in Native writing well into this century. The other two are land claims and the fight over stolen land, and increasingly, the question of identity in an estranged environment. Notice how all three of these topics are not topics chosen freely, but topics that were quite literally forced on the authors. What unifies Native North American Literature in terms of themes and topics is a common colonial experience, and intertribal ordeal which took pretty much the same form even for very different tribal peoples.

Authors like Occom wrote for a predominantly white market, which does not necessarily preclude critical positions towards colonial conditions, just as

critical comments every now and then do not make an author a resistance fighter. Then as now, the free market economy of North America was able to swallow just about everything.

And it did. It swallowed the first autobiography by an Aboriginal North American — William Apess (also spelled Apes) — and it swallowed Apess' criticism of the dominant discourse (O'Connell 1991). Barry O'Connell claims that Apess was writing in much the same manner that Henry Louis Gates pointed out in African American Writers in his book *The Signifying Monkey* (Gates.) Even though not much of this spirit is apparent in the autobiography on the whole, it is certainly there in the title *A Son of the Forest* (Apes 1829). The title denotes noble savagism and wild forest child, but this is exactly what Apess was not: he had grown up as a mixedblood in a white environment, had gone to school, served in the army, and worked in different jobs before he became an outspoken and skillful activist for several New England tribes, supporting them in their land claims fights, and being useful because of his ability to move in both worlds (Apes 1979).

While Apess was a fighter against the colonial system, three other authors writing in his time tried to overcome the system by being better or, by exploiting the opportunities it offered.

David Cusick had noticed how tribal histories were discarded with the turn of a hand by white historians - according to a belief widespread well into the 19th century, a people could not have a history without having a written alphabet. There were, as we know, several indigenous tribal writing systems in North America, but they, too, were discounted on the basis that they did not conform to Euroamerican standards. If this still seems acceptable to you, take into account that (following Derrida) depending on how you define graphic system, we all may be illiterates - maybe future generations will look down on all of us who weren't civilized enough to use simultaneous information transmitter systems (or whatever). Cusick in any case sat down and wrote a history for his people, starting in mythic time and then proceeding along the historical schemes used then in Euroamerican historiography, that is, in chronological order and from king to king, or, in this case, from one Atotarho to the next until the recent past. He did not find a publisher at first, and his booklet ended up being read as a curiosity (Cusick 1827).

Elias Boudinot was a different case. He was one of the driving forces behind the Cherokee alphabetization program — in order to fulfill the standards demanded by contemporary theoreticians of civilization, the Cherokee not only started a democratic electoral system and introduced slavery, they also developed their own writing system in their own schools, all along with their own newspapers and printing presses — none of which was able to prevent the forced relocation of the Cherokee to Oklahoma on the infamous 'Trail of Tears.' Boudinot was murdered in 1839 together with several of John Rollin Ridges family because he had favoured relocation.

Older scholarly accounts of Native American Literature credit Boudinot for the first piece of short fiction written by an indigenous author. The story in question is a short tract called "Poor Sarah" (Boudinot 1818) It is a romantic story about a poor Indian woman, and the author's name is given as Elias Boudinot. How exactly the story and the name ever became connected is subject to speculation. The story appears to have circulated before 1820, the copy I saw at UC Berkeley was dated 1818. The Cherokee youth would have been about 16 years old by then, so for all likelihood the author was not him but the 'real' Elias Boudinot, the politician and noted philanthropist - the one the young Cherokee boy Galgina was named after when he was baptized in mission school. In 1833 the story was reprinted in The Cherokee Phoenix, which was edited by Boudinot/Galgina. Other than in this case, Boudinot was an eloquent spokesperson for his people (Boudinot 1827).

For all we know today, the earliest pieces of short fiction were written in the second half of the 19th c., and the oldest piece Bernd Peyer enclosed in his very valuable volume of indigenous short stories *The Singing Spirit* was written by a woman, the Omaha Susette LaFlesche. Like Boudinot before her and many others afterwards, she was a product of the reservation school system in which English language and a rigid disciplinary system ruled. "Nedawi" is, not surprisingly, a rather cautiously written character sketch of an Indian girl.

If authors like Apess and Boudinot worked for the common good, there were always also those who primarily worked for their own benefit. George Copway, a handsomely built and intelligent man, travelled the lecture circuit in the 1840s and 1850s, and with a keen eye on what was in demand for after-dinner speeches and genteel reading circles, he provided just that, even if that included filching contemporary travel guides for material for his *Running Sketches of Men and Places in England, Belgium, and Germany*, (Copway 1851) or publishing whole texts that weren't his under his name. Donald B.Smith's biography of Ka-ge-ga-ga-bowh does not deny him sympathy, but dares to call things and circumstances what they are (Smith 1988).

The best-known Canadian Native poetess is of course Pauline Johnson who also wrote numerous short stories. The first female novelist, however, was Christal Mac Leod Galler. Her novel *Cogewea* (Mourning Dove 1925) introduced the identity problem which before her novel had surfaced mostly in autobiographical texts. There certainly is some 'signifying monkey' in Cogewea, and quite a bit of irony pointed at what appears as a narrowminded apartheid system with male chauvinism and sexism added to complete the picture. The protagonist - her name is Cogewea - is a mixedblood woman. She wins a rodeo contest but is refused the prize because she entered in a contest for whites only. When she subsequently enters the all-indian contest, she is in turn denied the prize since, so the logic goes, she is half white. Torn between two worlds she almost falls for a white rancher who wants to exploit her sexually, before she finally in a happy ending settles for another mixedblood cowboy. Her celebration

of the mixedblood antedated Gerald Vizenor's compassionate mixedblood tribal tricksters by more than fifty years. In between her and contemporary authors like Vizenor came a whole group of rather sad-faced stories which all conformed to a storyline established by John Joseph Mathews with his 1934 novel *Sundown* (Mathews 1934) and by D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* (McNickle 1936). In both novels, mixedblood protagonists are confronted with their dual identities, and rather than seeing the possibilities of doubleness, they despair and destroy themselves. The same sense of despair is still present in Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, both novels about Pueblo Indian war veterans who succumb to drinking first and escape from hospitals and the sucking current of evil and destruction that almost engulfs them through the cleansing powers of tribal ceremonies. With their celebration of tribal ceremonies — signifying, wholeness, epistemological otherness, and therewith hope — these novels fitted very much the demands of the 1960s and 1970s when the final faltering of the American Dream under the impact of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam trauma left many people searching for epistemological alternatives. Unfortunately, many readers and many critics forgot that they were handling literary texts and succumbed to the suggestiveness of the escape routes seemingly offering themselves. Sales of *Black Elk Speaks* which I mentioned before soared, and after that came the whole train of exploiters of the Carlos Castaneda / Lynn Andrews type, with occasional 'real Indians' happily participating: Sun Bear's bogus books come to mind and plastic medicine men making money off other peoples' misery. Not that I condemn any of them: the money was not easily earned, and consumers were enthralled by 'Indian' esoterics. That, however, is a different problem. What is important for our subject today is that Native American Literature as a coherent and interrelated corpus of texts started around 1970. For lack of any other definition, the one that was used then and is still in use now was an admitted bloodline scheme in connection with an implicit thematic approach. The bloodline scheme is a basically racist binary opposition according to which anyone with a percentage of 'Indian' blood is in, everyone else is out. The thematic approach is largely the result of the older media image of the Indian. The demise from the media scene of the older stereotype of the howling savage, the stoic monument, and the comical speaker of broken English did indicate a shift away from misconceptions of the North American indigenous population that had been popular for more than three centuries. I consciously use the term shift here, because the absence of negative stereotypical images does not preclude the possibility of continued misrepresentation on a different storyline.

Not able to liberate themselves from popular misconceptions about Indians, critics searched texts by indigenous authors for ethnographic content. The result — for example in Charles Larson's American Indian Fiction — was that Larson missed out on several works by indigenous authors but with non-Indian content while including others that made use of Indian material but whose authorship

was doubtful. The literary bookmarket, I mentioned it before, accepted and continues to accept texts from indigenous authors most easily if they cover Indian subjects. Among the texts by Native North Americans that have been accepted over the last decade were, of course, praiseworthy pieces like Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash* and the witty bestselling novels of Louise Erdrich. However, corraled by a closed network of supporting institutions and self-indulgent newsletters and the thematic expectations of readers and critics, this pattern is perpetuated in a dialectic relationship.

This means that whoever conformed to the thematic expectations of readers and critics and who also managed to pass him- or herself off as having Indian blood relations could sell books within the pan-Indian O.K.-corral. Fierce battles of bloodline envy broke out. Frank Waters' became a case in question when his publishers announced on the covers of his books that he was 'part Indian' (versions: one-eighth Cheyenne, Cherokee-mix; Apache) which was fiercely negated by 'real' Indian authors. Other impostors it took longer to discover: Jamake Highwater, self-styled Blackfoot, was really Gregory Markopoulos, son of Greek immigrants. Against this background his novel *Anpao: An American Indian Odyssee* (Highwater 1977) appears as a particularly brazen piece of comical con-manship. Ironically, there is a lot of the mischievous trickster spirit in the Highwater story, but many readers and critics failed to see that — they only felt duped, as they indeed were, so they turned the other way — and fell headlong for the next set of impostors which decidedly lacked the comical aspects of Highwater's story. I am speaking of Ruth Beebe Hill's fake Lakota epic *Hanta Yo* (Hill 1979) — unfortunately one of the first reviewers who praised the book before everybody else with the Lakotas in the lead tore it to shreds, was none other than Scott Momaday. And another case, the most recent and in my opinion the worst so far: *The Education of Little Tree*, the sales success of which is all the more embarrassing since the author has recently been found out not only to not have been of Cherokee descent but to have been Asa Earl Carter, a onetime segregationist speechwriter and Ku Klux Klan Activist who died in 1979.

Confusion everywhere. To my knowledge, if we do not count Howard Norman's case, Canada has not yet had a case of an impostor uncovered, but here the steam is on in the field of cultural authenticity / appropriation of voice. The United States saw the same sort of feud over tribal heritages when Leslie Marmon Silko attacked Gary Snyder in "An Old-Time Indian Attack, conducted in two parts" when Snyder, using Native American material in his poetry, had won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1974. The urge behind the attempt to secure tribal material for use by tribal people only is clear. I do not deny the necessity to correct persistent misrepresentations of minorities in colonial and majority discourse, and with books like Brian Moore's *Blackrobe* in mind I can only deeply sympathize with efforts to protect tribal traditions from this sort of exploitation. Blackrobe appears to be one of the rare occasions where the film

version is actually better than the book it was based on.

Is there a solution to the problem of cultural appropriation? Let me suggest something. I want to look at two more authors before I finish.

The first was a man who in his days worked as a managing editor of newsletters and advertising copy writer, as writer, high school and college teacher. A gentleman who hardly ever left his house without suit and tie, an opera fan who was respected by his neighbours and his community for his wide range of knowledge. I am speaking of Todd Downing, who spoke English, French, Spanish and Choctaw fluently, and who over the years published nine crime novels, a pageant, a book of travels and histories of Mexico, a Choctaw Grammar course, and numerous articles on all sorts of subjects. Critics like Charles Larson and others never noticed Downing because they were intently following their thematic approach, and it is quite obvious that, except for maybe one, Downing's crime novels do not conform to what we think of as Native American Literature at all. Other works seem to conform, but they were written for a mostly regional audience. My conclusion from the case of this missing author is that looking at Native North American literatures we have to also consider the respective interpretive community a certain text was intended for. Aboriginal authors writing literary texts for and within their own community (like, for example, the Micmac poet Rita Joe) will not write about the same topics in the same way as authors who do not live with the community. The possible and intended community response, which always shapes the form of the oral tradition, also influences the literary production.

The other example which I have in mind is that of Canadian author Rudy Wiebe. Wiebe, as a Mennonite member of a religious minority himself, won much acclaim (and a Governor Generals Award) for his 1973 novel *The Temptations of Big Bear*. One of his intentions writing the novel was expressis verbis to give voice to those that before didn't have one in the telling of their story, that is, the Cree Indians who participated in the 1885 rebellion. *The Temptations of Big Bear* was favourably reviewed by none other but Maria Campbell, author of *Halfbreed* and herself one of the leading Canadian authors of Native (or, rather, Métis) descent. Still, several years after Wiebe stopped writing — giving voice — to Native Indian characters in his works, with the argument that there had been a marked increase in the number of Native Canadian authors, and he did not want to speak in their place. Notably, Wiebe is still a board member of the Enowkin School, a Canadian Indian Centre of Creative Writing.

I think that we ought to take some steam out of the discussion while we can. The problem of cultural appropriation cannot be solved through censorship or legislative measures. My hope and my expectation at this time is that the whole problem of 'cultural appropriation' will be solved by authors and readers aware of the delicate ground they are on, and by critics who will cease to mistake some authenticity markers signifying otherness in a literary text for the real thing. We

ought to read texts as texts and not as shrines on authenticity, and we should counteract political attempts to pigeonhole authors according to colours, religion, or country of origin. Educated readers, I hope, will gradually cease to accept false and denigrating depictions of minorities. What we need and what we will hopefully see more of in the future, however, are more authors like Tomson Highway, like Dan Moses, and like Drew Taylor, authors who draw on tribal as well as non-tribal traditions in an unselfconscious way. What we need are, to quote Gerald Vizenor, more meetings of mixedbloods at cultural crossroads, meetings in respect and good humor.

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