https://doi.org/10.20378/irbo-51971

"The Only Good Indian Is a Dead Indian": Stereotypes of Indian Cultures and Native American Literature in W. D. Snodgrass's "Powwow" (1968) and Ray Young Bear's "For the Rain in March: The Blackened Hearts of Herons" (1980)

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The title of this article quotes an aphorism dating back to General Sheridan's Indian campaigns, the most radical denial of Native America. In an age of diverse cross-cultural encounters supported by the established disciplines of cultural and cognitive anthropology, a general consensus about the validity of the Indian experience seems to have been reached ultimately. Many mainstream writers as old and new 'Friends of the Indian'[1] made their contribution by dealing with this part of the national heritage in their works. In response, Native American intellectuals and artists like Geary Hobson ("Rise," 100-08), Wendy Rose ("Just What," 13-24), and Leslie M. Silko ("Old-Time," 211-16) have vigorously questioned the competence of these would-be Indians and white shamans.

One chapter of this controversy was written by W. D. Snodgrass (1968: 51-52) and Ray Young Bear (1980: 163-75). By carefully examining this peaceful exchange, we should be able to understand some of the basic issues involved, the accessibility of the Indian worlds to the outsider through the immediate experience and/or written evidence such as the literature of the Native American renaissance.[2] We shall have to ask whether students of Native American cultures, including authors like Snodgrass, tend to stress the universals and to neglect or even falsify the particulars, thus involuntarily continuing General Sheridan's Indian war.

As title and subtitle ("Tama Indian Reservation, Iowa, 1949") of the poem indicate, Snodgrass's comments are based on the experience of an event which has been characterized as "a social gathering, with spiritual significance. There are formalized dances which only certain dancers can participate in and there are

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[1] I deliberately use this rather ambiguous term. See Francis Paul Prucha (1973).

[2] The term refers to Kenneth Lincoln (1983).

others in which everyone can join ... It's a sharing." (Ortiz, "What Indians Do").

In the poem the 'we-they opposition' as a major structuring device reflects the situation of a rather ordinary group of tourists not sharing in but consuming a folklore show. These spectators quite early express their utter dissatisfaction with the program. They ask direction before leaving the scene for good. In the end, splatterings on the windshield threaten to hold up their smooth exit. 'They' are the powwow dancers who pack after finishing their job and give direction to the visitors without a distinct sense of place.

Such simple grouping is jeopardized by the introductory statement, "They all see the same movies," presented as an independent unit though syntactically analogous with the next line. The reader's irritation comes from the fact that traditionally not 'they,' the Indians, but the whites derive their stereotypes, e.g. from stock western movies. From the beginning the author obviously tries to undermine deep-rooted thought patterns.

The poem consists of four distinct parts, the first one describing the performance of traditional dances and concluding with an evaluating metaphor: "They all dance with their eyes turned down/ Inward-like a woman nursing/ A sick child she already knows/ Will die. For the time, she nurses it,/ All the same." In the second part both parties prepare their departure. In between, an extensive parenthesis explains the absence of the Iroquois. The third part is excluded from the 'we-they opposition.' It focusses on an isolated scene, an old Indian conjuring up the traditions without being heard by the young generation. The final part returns to the subject of Part Two, but concentrates on the actions and emotions of the spectators in particular.

This outline contradicts the notion of homogeneity as there are e.g., disharmonies between the powwow Indians and the Iroquois, the old Indian and the young. Yet the tourists insist on their limited vision of an antagonistic world. In the first part of the poem their derogatory comments on the dances are accentuated, almost justified, by rhyme and assonance: "They shuffle ... scuffing ... dust up ... Shuffle ... other." This sound structure is supported by repetition, variation, and the loss of temporal markers in the following lines. "same," "same" and "came" build a bridge between lines 1 and 9, complemented by "rain" in the end position of line 8. Language thus reflects the attitude of the spectators who perceive the powwow as a tedious reiteration of uniform details.

After so much ignorance has been displayed, the relatively precise observations and conclusions at the end of Part One come as a surprise. Once again the mode of presentation assists the meaning: Syntax and vocabulary are more variable. An introductory "even," repeated shortly afterwards, creates an atmosphere of expectancy which is heightened by the retarding specifications of lines 11 to 12 and the inversion of the main clause which at the same time guarantees an easy transition to the final metaphor. Its two components preserve the discrepancy between the original meaning of a tribal ritual and the actual performance.

The vocabulary of this section introduces some quite ambiguous terms from the history of red-white relations and, consequently increases the reader's irritation. Superficially, "tricked out" refers to the equipment of the dancers, but it also alludes to the outmaneuvering of the Indian with all sorts of tricks and some counter-strategies of the seemingly powerless victims. "Braveries" serves as another example: Synonymous with "tricked out," it describes the outfit, but also hints at the deeds of courage of an Indian brave. In both terms the connotative modify the denotative meanings which identify the dancers as persons lacking in good taste.

The author's ability to find a metaphor which does not openly violate the spectators' restricted field of vision, lifts him out of the group which he belongs to by virtue of the first person plural. He confirms this position by deducing a meaningful message from the observed details of the performance, its lack of variety and enthusiasm: These Indians are fairly uncommitted, but they keep on dancing in spite of the impending death of their culture. For the author, an originally regenerative event has become a sequence of tragic gestures.

In the second part of the poem, technical terms dominate. Right at the beginning, the "shrieking loudspeakers" ruin the melancholic mood of reflection and signal the transfer from the heart and brain to the stomach. Again the spectators remain unsatisfied as the hot dog stand has already been dismantled. In a parallel move the Indians have changed their outfits. Ironically, their everyday clothes are "cast off combat issues of World War II." In the subsequent long parenthesis, this field of reference recurs: The Iroquois who do not attend such pan-Indian powwows maintain a morally neutral position by building both war-preventing and war-supporting installations.

After this blow against the absentees, the poem returns to the departing Indians. The description of this scene includes some comic effects: Indians and hot dog stand have been "dismantled" to make them mobile. They "have to drive *all night*/ To jobs in truck stops and *all night* filling stations." They work in

"*st*ands," "*st*ops," "*st*ations" and "*st*ructural *st*eel." The snobbish tourists have to exploit the Indians as specialists of the six directions. But these experts leave the stage rather directionless, "They scuttle away from us like moths," attracted by the lights of modern food and fuelling installations. These ironies characterize the spectators as people who absorb all kinds of phenomena without integrating them into a coherent picture, as people unable to reconsider the derogatory initial comments of the poem.

The section featuring the vocabulary of modern civilization is followed by a scene without it and, consequently, separated from the main action and its props. Even "the glare of one bare bulb" becomes a "shining" through the organic tent cover. Inside, the bare bulb illuminates a very traditional situation. The tent itself is set "... past the trailers. Beyond us, one tepee is still shining/ Over all the rest." "Beyond us" certainly also means 'beyond the comprehension of the tourists.'

The interior scene consists of apparent contradictions recalling the metaphor of the first part: The old Indian is "shrunken" but "fierce-eyed," "all bones and parchment" but "his dry hands/ move: On the drumhead, always drumming ... howling his tribe's song for the restless young/ Who wander in and out." He is the only person honoring the tribal traditions, "over all the rest." He raises "his toothless drawn jaw to the light." This gesture is intensified by yet another contrast: "Like a young bird drinking, like a chained dog." The old man utters "words of such great age" but "Not even he remembers what they mean." Though this scene is separated from all other activities, the author reveals striking parallels to the dances. Once again, a ritual is being performed in spite of its ineffectiveness. And the author distinguishes it as "shining/ Over all the rest." In these passages subtle comment is made by placement and the choice of contrastive details. Here the author further softens the tough standards set by the tourists in the beginning and confirms his basic irritation about the diverse signals of life and death in the alien culture.

In the concluding lines the spectators continue their departure. As they did not notice the tent, and as their evaluation of the powwow was very final, they are not at all interested in new evidence. It is the author who in his final metaphors summarizes his deeper thoughts: "Windshield" and "highway" promise detachment from the challenges of the immediate experience. The departure of the group is temporarily held up by the "red and yellow splatterings on the windshield" qualified as "garish and beautiful remains/ Of grasshoppers and dragonflies/ That go with us; that do not live again." Here, the author returns to his well-tested use of ambiguities: The remains are "garish *and* beautiful," dead

and alive at the same time. We are all familiar with the images of grasshoppers as knights in shining armor in books for children. The dragonflies conjure up the same heroic past which can be revived in memory, metaphor, and ritual. The remains in the earth colors red and yellow, recalling the face paints from Part One, are as "garish *and* beautiful" as the equipment of the Indian dancers. The insects cannot keep up with the pace of the modern age, "They do not live again." Though, at least for a while, they stay with the visitors, impair their normal field of vision and prevent an all-too-easy escape. Yet, as before, only the author is able to attach symbolic meaning to this situation.

In spite of the poem's final vagueness, the unambiguous title phrase, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian," remains valid. The portrayal of something no longer vital, transmitting only faint signals of past glory creates a nostalgic mood without far-reaching consequences. On the basis of the evidence collected, a restoration of the good Indian would be quite an unrealistic request. The author is both insider and outsider of the group: He confesses his complicity, but he sees and learns more than the others. He knows about the scene in the tent illustrating his reflective passages in Parts One and Four. He succeeds in giving a general meaning to the various particulars by lifting them on a symbolic level. He refrains from rash judgments, he takes along lasting impressions which trigger off deeper thought and a poetic statement.

As a result, the author describes the event from a double outsider's perspective: The starting point of his irritation is the apparent merely mechanical performance of traditional rituals in the face of impending total loss.[3] For the author, the disappearance of this culture remains an undisputable fact. Ineffective tragic gestures arouse compassion and mourning and make him escape into a sort of elusive 'Weltschmerz.' More profound conclusions are not offered except the vague notion that the destruction of the Indian cuts off a visible link with the past. Snodgrass's poem fits very well into the tradition of the progressive liberals declaring their strong sympathies with the 'vanishing American' in a period of accomplished facts, when the frontier had been closed and the Indians physically defeated. The critic Michael Hopkins called such efforts "esoteric gravedigging" (47).

Still, we should not suppress the poem's merits. Its inherent contradictions evoke a rather differentiated view of the situation of a colonized people be-

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3 See Paula Gunn Allen's explanation of "repetition and lengthy passages of 'meaningless syllables'" in a ceremony ("Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective," 120-25). See also A. Grove Day (xi) and Margot Astrov (12).

tween some hope and much despair in the 1940s and 1950s. We also have to acknowledge that the author feels uneasy about his marginal position. And we should accept his sincere grief about the de-Indianization of America.

These positive features do not calm the anger of the Native American painter and poet Ray A. Young Bear born in 1950 on the very Tama Reservation which Snodgrass had visited the year before. His response is part of the long poem "For the Rain in March: The Blackened Hearts of Herons" published in 1980. Basically, the analysis of modern Indian existence in this poem does not differ widely from Snodgrass's. In Young Bear's poem, the powwow is introduced as a functioning ritual with commercialism as a negligible aspect. The first direct attack on the mainstream author concerns Snodgrass's gift of observation as he concentrated on the superficial and drew conclusions disregarding the potential and the spiritual meanings of the performance. The shortsightedness of the uninitiated is only partly excused as result of an Indian strategy to protect some essentials from the white man.[4] Deliberate outmaneuvering and the inability of the self-appointed peers to accept limits cause profound misunderstandings.

After this opening Ray Young Bear enlarges his target group by including "James Wright and countless others" who also dealt with Indian themes. He explicitly refers to Wright's "I am a sioux brave, he said in minneapolis" (144) featuring the stereotypical drunken Indian who has forgotten his traditions and thus destroyed the lifeline between past and present, individual and tribe which guarantees his Indian identity.[5] Snodgrass remains Young Bear's chief objective. He accuses him of totally missing the meaning of the songs and dances at the powwow. We have seen that Snodgrass indirectly recognized their historical dimension though he did not grasp their social function. So Young Bear's insistence on his birth right does not really concern his direct opponent but rather the white translators and imitators exploiting Indian themes while still sharing the concept of white cultural supremacy. Young Bear is wrong when he belatedly grants Snodgrass and the group the hot dogs they failed to get in the poem. Such minor manipulation turns out to be quite useful for the final portrait of a hopeless ignoramus which entirely neglects the white author's partial withdrawal from himself and his fellows.

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4 Indian attempts to protect the heritage were well-known to collectors of 'Indian poetry.' See Day, Allen ("Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective," 132), and Seyersted (16).

5 Coincidentally, Wright illustrates his views in a metaphor also combining nature and technology. Wright exchanged a series of letters with Leslie M. Silko before his death in 1980 discussing also the characteristic features of Native American writing. See Anne Wright, ed. (1986).

In the end, Snodgrass's "lust/ stirring and feebly coming alive / at the thought of women" is described as his last connection with the few remaining vital forces in the white world. Snodgrass is rejected as a despicable, obscene person whose primitive drives shape his opinions. With his inadequate background he cannot understand the greatness of the Indians. For Young Bear, the perverse and macabre final metaphor of "Powwow" convincingly proves his case.

It is quite easy to ward off some of Young Bear's blows because he evidently did not read the poem very carefully. Snodgrass was quite sensitive to the problems of approaching the unfamiliar. But his rather bleak outlook on the lasting qualities of Indian codes threatens to cut off Young Bear's ethnic roots. Consequently, he has to defend his right to plead without patronage. He is particularly outspoken in another poem with the programmatic title "In Disgust and in Response to Indian-Type Poetry Written by Whites published in a Mag Which Keeps Rejecting Me" (1980: 118-20).[6] Young Bear certainly belongs to the "Now Day Indi'ns" introduced by Kenneth Lincoln as "children of the old ways, students of historical transitions, teachers of contemporary survivals" (184). Gretchen Bataille counts him "among the growing number of American Indian writers who have transmogrified the oral tradition of their people into a written form accessible to those outside of Native American culture" ("Ray Young Bear," 1; see also Gish 21-29). So how can we contradict "The Keeper of Importance" as long as he feels the power of the traditions and finds an audience listening to his productive dialogue with the past? In a "Foreword" to a collection of contemporary poetry Vine Deloria supported Young Bear's artistic quest and his contradiction to Snodgrass's prophecy: "Once savored this poetry may brush away the years and tell you more about the Indian's travels in historical experience than all the books written and lectures given. That may be the reason that poetry seems to survive where everything else expires. That may be why these Indians still sing their songs of poetry to us" (13; see also Niatum "History," 34).

As a Native American poet Young Bear declares himself an authentic mediator, claims an exclusive right of representation, and challenges the competence of white authors, especially of those who do not share his views on the state of Native America. For Young Bear Snodgrass's nostalgic conclusions do not really contest the familiar formula of the good and dead Indian. In his article on

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6 Young Bear recently commented on "For the Rain in March" as a response to "Powwow." See "Connected to the Past: An Interview with Ray Young Bear," in Bruchac (341-47).

"The Morality of Indian Hating," N. Scott Momaday confirmed such continuities: "The relaxation of intolerance and the rise of pity are significant footnotes to the evolution of American morality" (37). And Michael Dorris in his article on "Native American Literature in an Ethnohistorical Context," concludes that in this old/new concept Indians are

> nobly *not* succeeding .... Such is the stuff dreams are made of. White writers almost invariably portray Native American cultures as fragile, repressive, deteriorating entities, teetering on the brink of extinction. These fictitious societies give no evidence of internal vitality. (155, 152-153)[7]

Young Bear's overdrawn attack continues a long debate about the accessibility of the Native American experience for the outsider. In "Powwow" the tourists and the well-intentioned author failed to share in a ritual as they never abandoned the role of the detached consumer.[8] The more recent discussion centers upon another cultural expression, the literature of the Native American renaissance. It seems to me that its interpretation involves new methods of killing the Indian. Native American authors caught between two worlds make it quite easy for critics to overrate their separation from the Indian world and their commitments to Euro-American traditions.[9] Such one-sided, restrictive and prescriptive treatment is based on a concept of the heritage as static, a dead museum piece.[10] It strikingly underrates the complexities and dynamics of accepted biculturality which is able to revitalize the old ways and make "American Indian

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7 See also N. Scott Momaday's lecture on "The American Indian in the Conflict of Tribalism and Modern Society," as paraphrased in Martha Scott Trimble (8); Hobson ("Rise," 105); Wendy Rose's poem ""Three Thousand Dollar Death Song," and Pearce.

8 See other "powwow poems" by Native American writers: Paula Gunn Allen's "Hoop Dancer," Lew Blockcolski, "Powwow Remnants" and "The 49 Stomp," Gogisgi/Carroll Arnett, "Powwow," N. Scott Momaday, "The Gourd Dancer" nila northSun, "Indian Dancer," and Carter Revard, "Ponca War Dancers."

9 A typical example is the following passage from Charles R. Larson: "Almost without exception the Native American novelist has been a kind of cultural hybrid, or cultural half-caste, somewhat dislocated from his traditional heritage. The fact that these writers as a whole have been so highly educated in the white man's sense separates them from their people, as we have seen illustrated in a number of their fictional characters ... Exposure to non-Indian education is clearly, then, the most distinguishing mark of their non-representativeness" (166-67).

10 Jarold W. Ramsey has called this "false classicism" (165).

Literature: A Tradition of Renewal" (Nabokov 31-40).[11] Starting from these facts Bo Schöler defined Native American Literature as

> a mixture of a non-Native American medium (written English) and non-Native American structures *and* of Native American themes and world views. In a sense, this amorphous literature has become a more or less independent existing artistic phenomenon, separate from tribal life and yet in often direct ways intrinsically part of it. Although the shared colonial experience colors all Native American literature, its very existence as a separate, written art form and as a cultural translator in some measure has caused it to reflect the compartmentalization of Western life. The result is complex and unique. ("Trickster," 137)[12]

In the context of recent literary criticism "killing the Indian" means "stealing the new bi-cultural identity" from the modern writer. It is a very urgent affair, because

> Native American Literature is in danger of becoming a new field for appropriation by cultural imperialists, that is by some white critics who are ready to step in yet another time to monopolize all the answers AND the questions pertaining to the lives and expressions of Native Americans. (Schöler, Introduction, *Coyote Was Here* 10)

The most obvious divergence of the Native American author from the traditions is the simple fact that he does not express himself in one of the native tongues. Though in many texts we find quotes of Indian languages, for the outsider most of them remain isolated from a specific context. Or they are used in a very limited, supportive function, e.g. to demonstrate how completely a character has rediscovered his cultural roots. Apart from the skepticism of the authors about the chances of success, this problem of communication could be held responsible for the abrupt endings of some novels at the very beginning of a new life in the old environment. The choice of English has a number of other consequences: In a novel like Leslie M. Silko's *Ceremony* or N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* the characterization of the 'keepers of the traditions' requires some use of a native tongue to secure ethnic credibility.[13] So the author

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11 See also Kenneth Lincoln's definition in *Native American Renaissance*: "The Native American renaissance ... is a written re-newal of oral traditions translated into Western literary forms. Contemporary Indian literature is not so much new, then, as regenerate: transitional continuities emerging from the old" (8), and Allen ("Answering," 41).

12 See also Allen (Introduction, *Sacred Hoop* 4).

13 But we should not forget that in *Ceremony* the most effective healer lives in Gallup and can claim a cross-cultural background by his extensive travels to the big cities.

has to find a strategy of re-Indianizing English, to use it as a medium of the "perception of experience as well as expression" (Ortiz, *Song* 3).[14]

There seems to be general consent among writers that English is a very pliable instrument. As Michael Dorris stated: "Their primary language of expression is English but an English accommodated to the special needs of their individual tribal histories and realities. In their literature, whether oral or written, this transformed English is adjusted to accord with their particular aesthetic" (156).[15] Therefore, the contemporary author's situation differs considerably from that of Indian writers at the end of the 19th century when English was understood both as a medium of social advancement and ideological exploitation.[16]

Equally disputed is the choice of the *written* word which has been deplored as another violation of the tradition.[17] This subject has gained new significance, because many writers of the Native American renaissance have underscored their ties to oral traditions. This part of the heritage not only implies a form of transfer but also "provides its own setting, the particular mood intended, and requires a certain immediacy of language which is provided by the storyteller or narrator" (Ortiz, "Creative Process," 47).[18] Storytelling passes on codes from one generation to the next as a ritual of survival, as a very direct method of fitting an individual into the stream of time.[19] And it defines the position of the storyteller within the tribal community. He is e.g. entitled to vary parts of the

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14 See also Davis (1976: 59-72), and the title formula of Maurice Kenny, *Dancing Back Strong the Nation.*

15 See also Kenneth Lincoln's use of the terms "rooted words" and "word senders" (45-49, 82-121) and Gerald Vizenor's term "wordarrows," Leslie Marmon Silko in an interview with Elaine Jahner ("Novel," 385) and Duane Niatum ("On Stereotypes," 161).

16 See A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff (191-202). In this article Ruoff also says: "As Indians became authors, they increased the power of the word always present in oral tradition by adding to it the force of the written word" (201).

17 See Wild (8), Silko ("Language," 54). See the transition from pictographs to written forms in Lynne Woods O'Brien, also Bataille ("Transformation," 87), Roemer (45-47), Zolbrod (465-533), and attempts to save features of orality by a specific system of description. See Tedlock, *Finding* and "On the Translation," also Jahner, "Intermediate Forms" (66-74).

18 See also Momaday, "Man Made of Words," 103-10.

19 See e.g. the title phrase of Floyd C. Watkins, "Culture Versus Anonymity in *House Made of Dawn.*

heritage;[20] some stories can become the property he has to protect during his lifetime. A story fixed in print, written in English, determined for a non-Indian audience still meets some of the requirements, but also distinguishes itself from its instrumental functions in the original context.[21] Indian writers and critics are aware of the alienation of some self-appointed storytellers from their tribes and of the new role acquired: "... rather than primarily interpreting or bringing a fresh vision of society for their context communities, they are interpolating and translating their communities for another culture" (Dorris 154).

This non-traditional role asks for preservation in new contexts. N. Scott Momaday insisted that the Native American writer "has to venture out, ... beyond his traditional world, because there is another very real world. And there are more worlds coming, in rapid succession. But it is possible for him to make that adventure without sacrificing his being and identity" ("Man Made of Words" in Costo 70). In this autobiographical works Momaday blended the mythical, historical, and the immediate voices and sufficiently demonstrated that the power of the word and their communality can be transferred from oral traditions to "the forms of Euro-American literature in order to reach the Anglo audience they wish to address" (Wiget, *Ortiz* 6).[22] Ray Young Bear also serves this purpose when "He writes as if he lived 10,000 years ago in a tribe whose dialect happens to be modern English" (Hugo 1973: 22).

In an article published in 1981 the poet, painter, editor, and critic Wendy Rose reported on her campaign to dissociate interest in literature by the North American Indians from the modish trends of the seventies. She employed a rather risky, not quite sales-promoting strategy which, nevertheless, pushes the door to this literature wide open. Wendy Rose defended the individual right of the Native American author to identify with his ethnic heritage publicly as one choice among many others. She explicitly warned writers and readers to uncritically accept standards deriving from stereotypical ideas:

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20 See the discussion of individual and communal authorship in Reichard, in Allen, "Sacred Hoop (112), Strelke, Krupat, Georgi-Findlay (54), Bowra, and Day (12).

21 See Allen ("The Sacred Hoop," 113), Day (6), and Ruppert: "It seems that as the oral becomes transformed into the written, the emphasis shifts from process to product. The poets become more concerned with transferring the vision and wisdom of the oral, than in duplicating oral transmission. Generally they take their inspiration from the oral tradition as subject rather than medium" (106). See also Ortiz ("Always the Stories," 57).

22 See also Bataille ("American Indian Literature," 17), Jahner ("Act of Attention"), Evers and Standiford. Besides some rather casual comments on the episodic structure of some novels and the three voices in Momaday's autobiographical works this subject of the continuation of oral traditions has not yet been explored very profoundly.

> If your idea is based on a solid academic background about tribal literatures, consider that many of us do not speak our native language, were not raised on our ancestral land, and have no literary tradition other than what we received in some classroom. If your idea is based on the observation of certain themes or images, consider that there is no genre of 'Indian literature' because we are all different. There is only literature written by people who are Indian and who, therefore, infuse their work with their own lives the same way you do. ("American-Indian Poets," 402)[23]

Honest readers and critics of Native American texts have to admit that they frequently prefer the extremely alien texts to those without obvious roots in the traditions.[24] Elaine Jahner observed these restrictive attitudes from the other side of the fence: "American Indian writers, artists and intellectuals are caught in a tyranny of expectations that too often suppresses their voices (Introduction, 343).

To appreciate the Native American perspective of a text certainly demands an examination and revision of our stereotypes which love stasis and hate dynamic processes like those of the bicultural experience. This also implies that we would have to stop playing off one component against the other, i.e. we should not overemphasize the ethnic aspect and deny the universal dimension, but rather try to reconstruct the significant encounter between the specific and the universal (a relevant theme also in the discussion of regional literatures and the timelessness of a text). Gerald Vizenor described this interrelationship as follows: "I believe my particular presentation of the mythic experience and the energy I go after, and the imagery in poetry, I celebrate from tribal sources. It's universal, too, but I celebrate from tribal sources. So that makes me an Indian poet. But I write poetry which doesn't look like that" (Bowers/Silet 47).[25]

There is no doubt that these conclusions give access to the Native American worlds mainly through the doors of the Euro-American and the universal component. Duane Niatum goes one step further when she says: "One possible difference between an Anglo artist and a Native-American is that the latter may

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23 Wendy Rose has also published her basic ideas on the subject in her books of poetry (*Academic Squaw*, *Lost Copper*). Some of these ideas are discussed also in Ramsey.

24 See Allen, "This Wilderness," (107) and "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective" (112-13).

25 See also Jahner's comment on Silko's interpretation of *Ceremony*: "In describing her novel, Silko herself relates to an ancient pattern of going out from a central point and then coming back with new insights that keep the home place vital" (387).

mirror his ancestral myths and legends. But the non-Indian should have no problem with the art object, if the artist has done his job (160).[26] The job of the artist as mediator of the alien experience is supported by the numerous critical-didactic articles Indian authors have published.[27] They deal e.g. with the circular structure of Indian thought, its consequences for the plot, with the unity of experience and expression, the Indian wholistic approach versus the analytic, the interrelatedness of the individual and the group and its traditions, the ritualistic qualities of storytelling/literature, and the Indian time concept. Some of these themes resume familiar disputes from cultural history.

Yet, some distinctive ethnic features need very careful attention and trained readers who can ask the right questions as "symbolic referents are not all that transferable from one society to another, nor do cognitive and imaginative processes seem much more so .... The critic, therefore not only must clarify symbols and allusions but also define or describe whole perceptual-interpretative systems" (Allen, Introduction, *Studies in American Indian Literature* x). The materials available on Indian cultures and the explanatory efforts of authors combined with modern concepts of textual constitution, grant deep insights into this literature. All sources, however, can by no means compensate for the lack of an appropriate spiritual attitude.[28] Acknowledging one's limits remains a prerequisite when approaching a literature celebrating the incompleteness of the individual within the wholeness of the universe. This does not only comprise a "reexamination of the most basic literary questions of form, signification, and values" (Wiget, Introduction, *Critical Essays* 15), but also the insight that for various reasons some products of Indian cultures are beyond our understanding and still meaningful.

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[26] See also Standiford: "And if the experience of the modern Indian is similar in some respects to that of many others who live in the United States, the amalgam of tribal experience and American experience provides an entrée for any English-speaking public (172).

[27] See Paula Gunn Allen, "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective on American Indian Literature" and "Iyani. It Goes This Way"; also the following titles in *The Sacred Hoop*: "Whose Dream Is This Anyway: Remythologizing and Self-Definition in Contemporary American Indian Fiction" (76-101), "Something Sacred Going on Out There: Myth and Vision in American Indian Literature" (102-17), "The Ceremonial Motion of Indian Time: Long Ago, So Far" (147-54), "Kochinnenako in Academe: Three Approaches to Interpreting a Keres Indian Tale" (222-44). See also Holm, McNickle, Momaday, "The Man Made of Words," "Native American Attitudes," and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*; Niatum, "History in the Colors of Song"; Ortiz, "Always the Stories" and "The Creative Process"; Silko, "Language and Literature"; Walters, "Odyssey of Indian Time" and "American Indian Thought.

[28] See e.g. Costo, "*Seven Arrows*" and Bataille, "Ray Young Bear" (2).

These standards are valid for every literary text, but in particular for the works of people who have to exist within and outside the mainstream, whose 'bizarre' traditions plead for coexistence between the spirits of liberation and commitment. Snodgrass's prophecy of the eventual death of the heritage remains unfulfilled as long as the manifestations of Indian cultures, such as Native American literature, provoke serious responses from readers and critics.

Outsiders whose own culture lacks balance and authenticity should refrain from writing more elegies on the good and dead Indian. They should rather accept Wendy Rose's threat and promise: "Basically, I'm telling the 'literary world' that whether they pay attention to us or not, whether we're a fad nor not, we're not going to be stopped. It always matters to us, I think, that other people appreciate our work, but the bottom line is contributing to our communities and adding to the total strength that makes for survival" (Hunter 47).

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