



FROM
NBI

RWRENT +
PURELY

POETRY

The Possibilities of a Native Poetics

by Kimberly Blaeser

*Everyone laughed at the impossibility of it,
but also the truth. Because who would believe
the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival
those who were never meant*

to survive?

"Anchorage"
—Joy Harjo

Of the twenty some poets whose work is included in this volume, all but one is still living and publishing as I write in this the new millennium. American Indian people are not only surviving, but thriving in the richness of their literature and in the vivid memories depicted here. For the poems included give voice not only to the experiences of the contemporary authors themselves, but extend themselves in subject, imagery, and form to forge connections with the literary and cultural history of tribal communities everywhere. From Maurice Kenny's vivid imaginative portrait of the death of "Blackrobe," Father Isaac Jogues the seventeenth century Jesuit missionary among the Mohawks, in "Wolf Aunt," to Louise Erdrich's playful trickster account in the narrative poem "Old Man Potchiko," to incantatory selections like Peter Blue Cloud's "Rattle," the poetry constructs its meaning within the continuum of Native reality. And although American Indian poets have firmly established themselves within the larger American and World canons, read together, their works forcefully attest to the possibilities of a Native poetics infused with echoes of the song poems and ceremonial literatures of the tribes, born out of the indigenous revolution, filled with the dialogues of intertextuality, sometimes linked to the cadences and constructions of "an-other" language, frequently self-conscious, and often resistant to genre distinctions and formal structures.

Native poetry's first appearance in print came as the result of a dual translation: from oral to written, from tribal language to English. In many instances the translation required to fully render the meaning and significance was never completed. By this I mean to suggest that many early works were sifted from their cultural context, displayed in a textual and secular nakedness that ignored the performed quality or distorted the sacred layers of ceremonial poetry. Few versions of traditional songs or poems suggested the language, music, ritual, and history of the original. Perhaps in response to this early wrestling of tribal literatures from their cultural contexts, many contemporary writers profess a certain literary sovereignty and self-consciously work to produce a community based poetry.

Still the early interest in American Indian poetry was immense, and our libraries and archives contain a myriad of transcriptions in a variety of forms from those which include musical notation like the work of Frances Densmore to text-only translations like the materials collected in Margot Astrov's *The Winged Serpent*. Perhaps because the publication of original poetry by individuals of Native American ancestry was not great during the first half of the twentieth century, selections from these early translations were reprinted with some regularity in anthologies. Then on the heels of what has come to be called the renaissance of American Indian Literature in the late 1960's, a group of writers, many of whom had already published in fiction, began a small revolution in poetry. First in chapbooks, then in small press anthologies like *Come to Power* (The Crossing Press, 1974), and finally in large press anthologies like *Voices of the Rainbow* (Viking/Seaver Books, 1975) and *Carriers of the Dream Wheel* (Harper, 1975), the voices still associated with Native poetry today began to surface: Duane Niatum, Joseph Bruchac, Leslie Silko, James Welch, Simon Ortiz, Roberta Whiteman, Ray Young Bear, Gerald Vizenor, Wendy Rose, N. Scott Momaday, Lance Henson, Anita Andreze, Carter Revard. . . . By the time Bruchac edited *Songs from this Earth on Turtle's Back* in 1983, the number represented there had swelled to fifty-two. The Native poetic revolution has continued to grow in both mainstream and small presses and the voices represented in this anthology are only a small number of the contemporary Indian poets publishing today.

Comparatively little in depth interpretation or criticism has been written about Native American poetry. Although articles have been devoted to the work of one or another poet and individual writers have garnered attention for their canon of work (which generally includes several genres), I know of no book length study devoted entirely to the poetic work of a single Native writer. In fact, the first book length analytical discussion of American Indian poetry that I am aware of—*The Heart as a Drum: Continuance and Resistance in American Indian Poetry* (Robin Fast)—was released January 5, 2000.

Despite this apparent dearth of critical analyses, certain facets of Indian-authored poetry have been frequently acknowledged. Most notably, the poems have been recognized to have a significant spiritual and physical

landscape, to invest themselves in a political struggle, to search for or attempt to articulate connections with the individual, tribal, or pan-Indian legacy, and particularly significant to the poetic form—to retain connections to the oral tradition. I would like to suggest at least one other significant facet: the poems are to a greater or lesser degree also engaged in framing a response to the perceived expectations of Native American literature.

In "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel," Sherman Alexie satirizes the stereotypic expectations of American Indian literature claiming that such a novel must have Indians with tragic features, a half-breed protagonist, visions, alcohol, beautiful Indian women, Indian men from horse cultures, and a requisite tragedy like murder or suicide. We might add war veterans, bits of Native language, ceremony and a wise elder! But in all seriousness, I believe American Indian Literatures (plural) have become aware of the expectations placed upon Indigenous Literature (the single entity) and have responded in some fashion so that what has evolved is what Louis Owens calls metanarratives. There is a certain inevitable self-consciousness present, a constant need to respond to or to interrogate the desire for commodification of Native traditions, both literary and non-literary. Geary Hobson and Leslie Silko addressed such issues as early as 1979 in essays dealing with white shamanism in *The Remembered Earth* anthology, Hobson in "The Rise of the White Shaman as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism" and Silko in "An Old Time Indian Attack Conducted in Two Parts." There is a continual attempt, these and other authors suggest, first to simplify Native experiences and to pigeonhole tribal literatures, then to imitate the stereotypical idea of a Native literature. American Indian Literatures find themselves the object of a sometimes desperate search for a certain kind of "authenticity" in literature that borders on the romantic.

The poetry, however, must be allowed its complexity, its multiple layers of connection and reality. The poets and the poems are individual, displaying their own particular voices, methods, themes. Although thematically, and sometimes stylistically, similarities surface, the poems are neither solely wedded to a Native literary aesthetic (however we might define it), nor do they operate completely separately from the Native literary and cultural traditions. The writers in this volume emerge from a range of different physical and physic places on the map of Indian literature. At the same time, the selections from their work do illustrate several important continuities in what I am suggesting might be called a Native poetics. Still these continuities exist simultaneously with deep and significant variations.

It would, for example, be difficult for one to mistake the prose poems of N. Scott Momaday included here in "The Colors of Night" for those say of Joy Harjo as represented here by "Grace." Though both poets are writing in a narrative mode in these instances, the diction, cadence, and timbre of their works distinguish them. When Momaday writes, "One night there appeared a child in the camp," or "Thereafter, wherever the old man ventured,

he led a dark hunting horse which bore the bones of his son on its back," the lines have a sparse lyricism and a certain formality or an archaic quality tied to word order and sentence structure which we recognize as characteristic of his style. When Harjo writes, "We had to swallow that town with laughter, so it would go down easy as honey," or "I could say grace was a woman with time on her hands, or a white buffalo escaped from memory. But in that dingy light it was a promise of balance," we likewise recognize a certain informality of phrase, and a power achieved through the accumulation of unusual imagery that we associate with Harjo. Both writers, both poems, invest themselves in a connection with the oral tradition through the process of storytelling, by forging links to older stories, and through their preoccupation with sound. Both authors give important attention in the poems to the rendering of place. Both employ personification (Age, Grace). Both establish a tribal milieu. The similarities are many and many of them might position these poems within the genre of Native poetics. However, the distinctions are likewise great and establish the writers and poems as individual. Gathering an understanding of what might constitute a Native poetics goes a long way in assisting us in the reading of the poems in this volume. It does not take us the full way. The poetry must be allowed its complexity.

Poems like Paula Gunn Allen's "Dear World" and Linda Hogan's "The Truth Is" do deal with the mixed-blood reality Alexie playfully recognizes as a prerequisite for "great" Indian literature. So does Alexie's own "13/16." Poems like Simon Ortiz's "Bend in the River" and Carter Revard's "Wazhazhe Grandmother" offer fine examples of the investment in and embodiment of place in American Indian poetry. Wendy Rose's "Three Thousand Dollar Death Song" is written as political protest. Indeed, within this small sampling of Native poetry, we can locate most of the facets associated with the genre. We can also locate the differences, the marks of an individual voice: the arresting imagery tied to dreams in Ray Young Bear's poems, the anecdotal humor in Luci Tapahonso's, the autobiographical strains in Roberta Whitman's. This intricate weaving of Native traditions and consciousness with individual experiences and identities creates a richness in contemporary Indian poetry. The poems carry history, and therefore perspective, into their encounters with language and life. They also carry the will to survive. Perhaps the most significant facet of a Native Poetics involves the impetus to rise off the page, to teach, to incite continuance. As Linda Hogan writes in "Neighbors," "This is the truth, not just a poem." The questions Chrystos raises in "Today Was a Bad Day Like TB" are not merely rhetorical, they are revolutionary. The threats to ecological survival depicted in Leslie Silko's "Long Time Ago," are not mere fantasy, they are frighteningly prophetic. The poetry finds its place in the realms of literature and life; the poets demand that we grant it both realms. As Linda Hogan also writes: "This is a poem and not just the truth."