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Introduction Only the Beginning

Discovering America

In four World's Fairs held between the Civil War and World War I, writes Frederick E. Hoxie, white attitudes toward Native Americans moved from the social evolutionists' optimism in Philadelphia in 1876, with their belief in the Indians' "progress" and future, to the opinion in San Francisco in 1915 that Indians were "an interesting but limited people whose future was of only marginal concern to their fellow Americans."¹ Indians didn't figure largely in the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, but the most prominent presentation of native life was the bronze statue by James Earle Fraser, "The End of the Trail": an exhausted Indian slumped in the saddle of a broken-down pony. This statue won a gold medal, and was one of the Exposition's most popular attractions. Today, if the Indians are thought about at all, the general assumption is that they have long since fallen from their ponies and vanished. Today, despite something of a resurrection of interest in the Indians in the 1960s and early 1970s, they are still likely to be seen by most people as victims of inevitable progress, their tribal names used to sell cars and trucks, the heads of their heroes (such as Crazy Horse, who was murdered by whites) used to decorate postage stamps.²

D. H. Lawrence wrote that "the real American day" would only dawn when Americans "at last discover America and their wholeness."³ But America still refuses to look at itself and its history. We still refuse to acknowledge the truth of William Carlos Williams' statement: "History! History! We fools, what do we know or care? History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery."⁴ And today we remain ignorant of the plight of Indians living in cities (more than half of the Native American population) and of life on the reservations that, according to a recent article in the *New York Times* (December 11, 1986), are in terrible shape, with conditions "bad and worsening with no immediate help in sight." As Suzan Harjo, executive director of The National Congress of American Indians, says in the *Times* article: "The situation in Indian country is a national disgrace."⁵

Despite everything, however, the Indian has not disappeared. In fact, more and more Native Americans are now writing about their lives and experiences in fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and autobiography than ever before. There is, indeed, a Native American renaissance in the arts, which

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Native American Literature: A Brief Survey

There are approximately two million Native American people in the United States, some one-half of one percent of the total population. In that figure are some of the most interesting poets and writers in the English language—poets and writers present in such numbers, given the tiny percentage, that one can only wonder at their determination, energy, and skill and the power of the tradition and culture that has nurtured them.

In fact, Indians have been writing in English for over two centuries. The earliest autobiographies were produced by Christianized Indians, the first in 1768 by the Reverend Samson Occum, a Mohegan (who also wrote *Choice Collections of Hymns and Spiritual Songs* in 1774), and the second by the Pequot William Apes whose *Son of the Forest* appeared in 1829. Then came books on various subjects by David Cusick (Tuscarora), the Sioux Ohyesa (Dr. Charles Eastman), Luther Standing Bear (also Sioux), and John Joseph Mathews (Osage). The first fiction (a fictionalized conversion story) was written by the Cherokee Elias Boudinot in 1823, while the first "true" novel, entitled *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murteta*, was produced in 1854 by John Rollin Ridge, another Cherokee. The earliest known book of poems by an Indian is *The Ojibway Conquest* (1850) by the Ojibway George Copway (Kah-ga-gah-bowh). Ridge's *Poems*, the second poetry book, appeared in 1868. Other nineteenth and twentieth century poets include the Creek Alex Posey (1873-1908), whose *Collected Poems* was posthumously published in 1910; the Mohawk E. Pauline Johnson (1862-1913), whose *Flint and Feather* came out posthumously in 1917; and the Wyandot Bertrand Walker.⁶

There are many others. Wendy Rose is preparing a multi-genre bibliography of book-length works by Native American and Eskimo authors. She has discovered nearly three hundred books from the 1950s to the present. Still, they are hardly household titles or household names, and they are seldom, if ever, found in standard histories of American literature. In fact, until about the last twenty years, what interest there was in Native American literature (though it wasn't called literature) was concentrated in the fields of anthropology, linguistics, and folklore and on certain poets and writers. These include Mary Austin, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olsen, Frank Waters, and more recently Jerome Rothenberg and Gary Snyder—the full story is told in Michael Castro's *Interpreting the Indian: Twentieth Century Poets and the Native American* (1984).

The earliest collection of aboriginal poetry appeared in 1918 with George W. Cronyn's *The Path on the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants*. There followed Mary Austin's *The American Rhythm: Studies and*

Re-expressions of Amerindian Songs (1932), Margot Astrov's *The Winged Serpent: An Anthology of American Indian Prose and Poetry* (1946), and A. Grove Day's *The Sky Clears: Poetry of the American Indians* (1951).⁷ Native Americans were writing poetry, drama, and fiction during the years from 1918 to 1951, notably the Flathead D'Arcy McNickle and the Cherokee Lynn Riggs (one of whose plays was made into the musical "Oklahoma!").

But prior to the 1960s there was little interest in Native American poetry and prose, and it was difficult to find, since it was published mostly in small magazines with small circulations.⁸ Then came John Milton's two collections of contemporary Native American poetry, prose, and art in *South Dakota Review* (vol. 7, no. 2, Summer 1969, and vol. 9, no. 2, Summer 1971). In the Summer 1969 issue, for the first time in one place, appeared the poetry of Simon Ortiz and James Welch; the Summer 1971 issue carried the poetry of Duane Niatum, Ray Young Bear, and others. All this took place about the time that N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for *House Made of Dawn*, which went far in establishing the worth of Native American literature in the eyes of a mainstream literary audience.

In 1975 *Carriers of the Dream Wheel*, the predecessor of this anthology, made a distinguished appearance as "the first substantial collection of contemporary Native American poetry."⁹ It was poetry of mingled roots, drawing on Faulkner, Winters, Vallejo, Hugo, Wright, Roethke, Neruda, and other sources available to late twentieth-century writers, as well as on the native oral tradition and individual vision. Since then, Native American literature has become one of the most lively developments on the American art scene. But it still fights for recognition and acceptance in the curricula of our schools and colleges, and it is still something of a secret.¹⁰ Few large publishing houses have shown serious interest in the phenomenon, preferring to give the world *The Teachings of Don Juan, Rolling Thunder*, or *Hanra Yo*. So Native American poets must still rely on the small presses and magazines as well as some university presses—Illinois, Purdue, Washington, and Massachusetts have recently published volumes by Native American poets. Moreover, in a consistent pattern of omission, contemporary poetry anthologies generally ignore Native American poets. *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poets* edited by Helen Vendler (1985), William Heyen's *The Generation of 2000* (1984), *New American Poets of the 80s* edited by John Meyers and Roger Weingarten (1984), and *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* edited by Nina Baym et al. (1985) contain not one Native American poet. Three anthologies contain one Native American poet each. They are Daniel Halpern's *The American Poetry Anthology* (1975) which contains five poems by James Welch, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (1983) edited by Alexander W. Allison et al., which contains three poems by Leslie Silko, and *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets* (1985) edited by Dave Smith and David Bottoms, which has four poems by Simon Ortiz. So, while some poets say they don't like the idea of segregated anthologies, they still seem necessary until those who edit major anthologies and publish books of poems abandon their tokenism and parochialism.

What Distinguishes Native American Poetry?

Vine Deloria, Jr., has written that modern Indian poetry can "tell you more about the Indian's travels in historical experience than all the books written and lectures given."¹¹ Although a poem is an individual response to experience, Deloria's remark is illuminating. More than most poetry being written today, Native American poetry is the poetry of historic witness. It grows out of a past that is very much a present. Anglo-America, in the main, does not believe in history. Things simply turned out the way they did through a natural process, one of whose names is Manifest Destiny. History can be taken for granted, in the way of the conqueror, because things worked out the way they were supposed to. But the Native American poet *is* his or her history, with all its ambiguities and complications. Their history is not something external to be learned, molded, or ignored, though it may be something that has to be acknowledged and recovered. It is embodied and unavoidable because the weight and consequences of that history make up the continuum of the present. This fact gives an urgency to the utterance, a resonance to the art that carries it deeper than much of the poetry one finds today. The poets are still "singing for power."

So what distinguishes Native American poetry? Isn't it simply a sub-branch of Western regional literature, as the chief editor of a reputable publishing house once suggested to me? Or is it just poetry with a variety of themes and techniques that happens to be written by Native Americans? Some of the poets themselves are uneasy with the term. "There is no *genre* of 'Indian literature,'" writes Wendy Rose, "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 that you do."¹² Duane Niatum, too, asks if there is an "Indian Aesthetic that is different from a non-Indian."¹³ He answers that there is not. "Anyone who claims there is encourages a conventional response from both Indians and non-Indians, and as a result actually inhibits the reader's imagination."¹⁴ Jim Barnes doesn't like terms such as "regional writer," "ethnic writer," or "Native American writer" because all are reductive. "The writer is first a writer, second a Native American, a Black, a Chicano."¹⁵

Of course these poets are right. Too often a classification can reduce attention to what is special; it can be used to pigeonhole and thereby deny full regard. But if we use a term such as "Native American poetry" appropriately, if we use it knowing that such a grouping is only a start, a convenience, an aid to understanding that leads to reinforcement and intensification of attention, then it is useful. It helps us to hold on to something new and distinct. The poets vary widely from each other in many ways, but they are also similar in many ways. One thing is certain: these poets can hold their own on the American literary scene today. They are an integral part of it.

The well-known Luiseno painter Fritz Scholder expands this question of classification to the visual arts. He too objects to arranging artists by race or sex. "Painting, like most of the visual arts, is an individual activity that is

completely personal, and can only be developed through one's own unique frame of reference. If one is to make a statement in whatever medium, one must find out who one is and fully accept it."¹⁶ There is a point to be made here, even if we ignore Yeats's dictum that it is out of the *quarrel* with ourselves that we make poetry. It is true that an artist or poet today must achieve an individual voice or vision. But to talk about an individual artistic activity that is "completely personal," capable of being developed through "one's own unique frame of reference" sounds more typically Anglo-American than Native American. The Native American poet seems to work from a sense of social responsibility to the group as much as from an intense individuality. In fact, a poet wrote to me recently, "I have heard Indian critics say, referring to poetry, that it is best if there are no I's in it. I grew up and continue to live among people who penalize you for talking about yourself and going on endlessly about your struggles."¹⁷ And another poet wrote, "My attitude is that it is not my personal life that is important, but the work that comes through me somehow. It is something deeply ingrained and difficult to overcome."¹⁸ The individual voice in Native American literature would seem to be at its strongest when it is not just "individual" (and it is all a matter of degree) but also "representative." Often the individual speaks for, is spoken through. We see this across the spectrum of Native American artists—from traditional singers to the contemporary poet Joy Harjo: "She learned to speak for the ground / the voice coming through her like roots that / have long hungered for water" ("For Alva Benson . . ."). Many Native American poets regard themselves as both distinct individual voices and voices that speak for whatever cannot speak, as in Linda Hogan's poem "Who Will Speak," which desires to speak for the animals and the earth.¹⁹

If I approach a definition of Native American poetry obliquely and hesitantly it is not simply because of problems such as the foregoing. If one says Native American poetry is poetry written by Native Americans the difficulty might appear to be solved—more on that in a short while. The best way might be to say I'm not really interested in defining this poetry. Its full and generous presence in this volume will *announce* what it is in its own terms, using its own names—"we wonder / whether anyone will ever hear / our own names for things / we do" (Gail Tremblay, "Indian Singing in 20th Century America").

I cannot define "Indian" or "Native American" with any confidence. We whites, from our arrival on this earth on turtle's back, have gotten it all wrong. (Even white insistence on telling the Indians that they migrated over the Bering Strait is contradicted by Indian legend and tradition—legend and tradition more culturally significant than any archaeological proof.) The latest insult is to measure blood. To be enrolled in a tribe, says the Bureau of Indian Affairs (the BIA), one must possess one-quarter Indian blood.²⁰ The best definition I can arrive at is this: Native Americans are Native Americans if they say they are, if other Native Americans say they are and accept them, and (possibly) if the values that are held close

and acted upon are values upheld by the various native peoples who live in the Americas. It would be presumptuous for me to define further. Many questions such as whether a person is Native American if he or she has rejected tribal values and identity I leave to others, for it does not concern us here. All the poets in these pages come from a Native American background and, as James Welch has said, "For the most part an Indian knows who he is."²¹ Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's words ring in the ears: "Writing, for me . . . is an act of defiance born of the need to survive. I am me. I exist. I am a Dakotah. I write. It is the quintessential act of optimism born of frustration. It is an act of courage, I think. And, in the end, as Simon [Ortiz] says, it is an act which defies oppression."²²

Climate of Change: Poetic Emergence

Why and how has Native American poetry achieved such distinction in so few years? One reason is that the intellectual climate changed during the 1960s. These years and their legacy brought about for many a rejection of the supremacy of Western civilization and a rejection of the Western idea of high art. The prevailing ideas of political and artistic hegemony were confronted and the established canon challenged. New beginnings were sought, and Native American writers responded. In addition, while, as we have noted, much remains to be done, channels for Native Americans have opened. Some have studied with famous authors who have encouraged and fostered their work and careers. My own interest in Native American poetry was sparked when I picked up a special supplement of *The American Poetry Review* in 1975 entitled "Young American Indian Poets: Roberta Hill, Ray A. Young Bear, Duane Niatum, James Welch." The supplement was edited by the distinguished poet Richard Hugo, who at the time was teaching at the University of Montana in the Master of Fine Arts Writing Program.

In his introduction, Hugo discusses what attracts him to Native American poetry. He finds it "both imaginative and highly individualistic."²³ He believes that the poets are mining the same seam as major twentieth-century poets such as Eliot and Yeats "who felt we inherited ruined worlds that, before they were ruined, gave man a sense of self-esteem, social unity, spiritual certainty and being at home on the earth."²⁴ This is due to the fact, Hugo suggests, that Indians come from "a recently destroyed civilization. No Hugo suggests, that Indians come from "a recently destroyed civilization. No other minority group does."²⁵ (a qualified statement). For white poets, Hugo continues, no matter how true this theme of ruined worlds may be, it nevertheless results from "an idealization of a past they never knew."²⁶ But for the Indians this ruin is fact, a real, known fact. So, says Hugo, the Indian poet is an authentic paradigm of the modern condition. However, if individual isolation is the source of much lyric poetry today, in the Indian poet it is combined with a cultural tradition that is "still a living thing in the memory,"²⁷ and consists of "establishing personal identity through ritualistic discovery of kinship with objects and creatures of nature."²⁸ We may want to

quality such statements. The cultural tradition does not just exist in the memory. It exists in act, thought, speech; the "ritualistic discovery of kinship" sounds peculiarly mechanical and quaint. Nevertheless, Hugo renders us a service by directing us toward this new poetry and trying to help us enter its world, even though he discusses it on the whole, not in relationship to contemporary "mainstream" work, but to other "minority" poetry. In comparison with these unnamed other "minority" poets, he finds that Native American poetry "seems most to involve emotional possession of materials."²⁹ Since he claims that "no audience save the self is presumed,"³⁰ we may deduce that he sees Native American poetry in contradistinction to the poetry of social and political commitment, presumably mostly Black poetry, being written at the time. He praises Native American poetry "for creating interesting sounds with poetry,"³¹ that is, for craft.

For Richard Hugo, then, Native American poetry is thoroughly modern, yet it reaches back to a cultural tradition substantially different from that available to other modern poets. Native American poetry is not overtly, militantly, or stridently political; it has depth of emotion and consciousness of form. Whatever the shortcomings of Hugo's essay (the political and "committed" element in Native American poetry is ignored, although most of it appeared after Hugo's essay), this presentation of younger Native American poets to the larger literary world via a magazine with large circulation and prestige by a well-known and respected poet represented a major advance.

Poetic Themes

What are some of the themes of Native American poetry? Reading this anthology, each of us can come up with answers. I will suggest a few. Both cultural traditions and Native American society itself are under stress. Suicide, alcoholism, unemployment abound. The situation is a national disgrace. The poets have responded to this crisis, and none more powerfully than James Welch in his novels and poems. His well-known poem "Harlem, Montana: Just Off the Reservation," with its place name linking one place of disaffection in Montana with another in New York, indicts a whole country. And yet the anger is never strident. It is dissolved in an irony that infuses all details, from the Indians drinking in the "best" taverns, to "money is free if you're poor enough." Words accrete ironic weight by juxtapositions: "runners" (smugglers of liquor onto reservations), "running for office." Indians are "planted" in the jail by the local farmer/constable. Everything is confused; there is no cultural authenticity for white or Indian. Welch's complex language keeps alive confusion as a series of possibilities; it draws us into the poem but keeps us off balance. How are we to regard the drunk who "bugs the plaster man / on the cross with snakes"? Christ is no savior. The man on the cross is plaster, and the Indian world of animal-human relationships is reduced to something like the DTs with serpents (the serpents also recall the biblical ancient enemy). "Bugs" suggests intense annoyance

on the part of the plaster man. In the drunken state, are these imaginary snakes seen as spies (reading "bugs" in the context of surveillance)? What could they hope to learn? It is a world of delirium and paranoia, bits and pieces of meaning. The drunk himself has no identity, or at best a mixed-up one. He is an ex-Methodist who is now a "saint" in the Indian church. We can no longer be sure of point of view. In whose eyes is he a saint? The language shoots out in a number of directions. We catch it as we can. The paradox is that Welch writes with such energy about cultural decay. Yet there is a crazy, surreal energy about the whole town, Indian and white (and Turk) that fights against decay. It is as if the poet were saying this inchoate place still has possibilities; there is still life here. The poem ends with the young bucks inside the shot-up store yelling that they're rich. The Indians have been sucked into a world of perverted values; they identified the ruined store with wealth and have shot their way into plenty, trapping themselves. But their prayer, "Help us, oh God, we're rich," is not just easy, if sharp, irony. They still have the power of prayer, even if only in the form of an exclamation or idiom. The poem certainly does not exactly end on an up beat, but it is not altogether bleak nihilism.³²

We can see a slightly stronger expression of faith in the tradition in the poetry of Louise Erdlich. The problem for the uprooted drunk Raymond Two bears (in "Family Reunion") is to get home again. The key image is the turtle—a real snapper and not just some useful symbolic entity. And yet the turtle is also cultural *mnemonon*, for this is, after all, the earth on turtle's back ("the old house caulked with mud / sails into the middle of Metagoshé"), and Ray's smell is the "rank beef of fierce turtle pulled dripping from Metagoshé." Ray is a lost soul, unaware of cultural values. He blows off the turtle's head with a cherry bomb, an act of cruel and practical indifference. But the animal is not that easily destroyed. After Ray had gone "to sleep his own head off," the next day, "headless and clenched in his armor," the turtle drags himself off. Even though Ray doesn't know it, he and the turtle are still connected, despite the wasteland in the poem. The headless turtle climbs a hill and aims for "a small stream that deepens into a marsh." It has been hauled from the lake, had its head blown off, and now, in a kind of rebirth, finds a stream that will presumably widen into a lake. The cyclic pattern is still there. Turtle is not destroyed. "Somehow we find our way back." The line reverberates. But to what? The submerged image of the turtle gives strength. Ray's body pulls him toward home; his hands become "gray fins," and his face has "the calm patience of a child who has always / let bad wounds alone." Ray is clearly in bad shape and, with his weak heart, may be dying. His bad wounds should have been cared for. Yet in the strange world of the poem, realistic yet subliminal, Ray somehow is the turtle. The turtle seems to return to another, deeper existence, as if to grow another head, and Ray has the look of a creature "that has lived / for a long time underwater." The poem weaves opposites together, and ends very oddly with "angels," creatures from another range of reference altogether, "lowering

their slings and litters" as if they were divine Red Cross workers or refugees from "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Does Ray, a being between two worlds (as his name "Two bears" suggests), take refuge in some form of Christianity? The last stanza reads like a hallucination. The poem does not present a conclusion; it simply presents a situation. But the most powerful entity in the poem is the turtle.

Time and time again in Native American poetry we find a picture of raw existence side by side with a refusal to cave in, often with hints of renewal through connection with tradition. In Erdrich's "I Was Sleeping Where the Black Oaks Move," the relentless water that has been damned (cause of much lost Indian land), uproots the trees with their nests of herons. ("Nests" is a loaded cultural word. We recall Black Elk: "Our teepees were round like the nests of birds, and they were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children."³³) The forest is pulled through the spillway, and trees surface singly. The scene is fully presented realistically, yet the tenor is almost allegorical. The nation's hoop is broken; we are "below the reservation," after "the long removal." ("Removal" is as loaded a word for Indians as "holocaust" is for Jews.) Grandpa explains: herons are ghosts of people unable to rest. But there is a way back, symbolized by the dream, with its full Native American implication of a creative source:

Sometimes now, we dream our way back to the heron dance.

Their long wings are bending the air
into circles through which they fall.

They rise again in shifting wheels.

How long must we live in the broken figures
their necks make, narrowing the sky?

The fall is really part of the full wing-beat and they rise again. The process is cyclical, circular. The poem ends, not with a question but a statement, almost an exclamation. This part of the circle has to be endured; it is as if it is necessary to live in the broken figures for a time, in the narrowing. As Yeats said, only that which has been broken can be whole.

Voices of the Past: The Oral Tradition

The oral tradition of speech is vital to Native American poets. In the anthology and elsewhere, poets write of how they were *told* what to do and how to be—told stories and legends. Time and again in the anthology one feels the presence of living *voices*, the commitment to orality in the nonoral medium of print, a form "locked in space, inanimate."³⁴ To be sure, Native American poets are aware of the emphasis in the poetry of the 50s and 60s on "breath"—one recalls the Black Mountain School, and in particular Charles Olson's important essay "Projective Verse" (1960), as well as the Beat poets, Allen Ginsberg especially. But the human voice in these pages—

insistent, animating, animated—I like to think of as the direct descendant, or literary equivalent, of the language of song and chant used to communicate with (and largely derived from) the world of the spirit, the language of the fullest life of being itself. In the oral tradition this language *is* life. As David Guss notes of the Yekwana, a people from the northern Amazon, "words are not simply uttered or sung but infused with the actual spirit of the chanter."³⁵ Native American poets attempt in their insistent utterances to lessen the distance created by print, to transform the "passive word of the written page" into an "active immediacy."³⁶ The talking, the singing, the telling, the writing pass on the voice to an anonymous audience and attempt to make a community. The poems do not withdraw into style, but project into life.

We should, then, listen to these poems as well as read them. For, as N. Scott Momaday's Rev. J. B. B. Tosamah in *House Made of Dawn* asserts, when you hold onto things heard you come directly into the presence of mind and spirit. The white man, he says, has taken words and literature for granted. He has "diluted and multiplied the word" and is therefore "sated and insensitive."³⁷ This is not just another book of poems. We must use the printed word, and go beyond it, go back to its sources.³⁸

Reverencing Tradition: Ancestors and Myth

Parents play a major part in Native American poetry, in the passing on of tradition; Momaday has noted in *House Made of Dawn*, the oral tradition is always but one generation from extinction.³⁹ None of the poets surpasses Simon Ortiz in parent-reverence. We see his father in the poem "A Story of How a Wall Stands," a poem about the oral tradition itself, and in his essay "Song, Poetry, and Language—Expression and Perception," where he gives a full and loving portrait of his father, the "thousand year old man," keeper of ancient traditions.⁴⁰ Paula Gunn Allen has described how her mother constantly told her stories, "and in these stories she told me who I was, who I was supposed to be, whom I came from, and who would follow me."⁴¹

Grandparents play a large part, perhaps because they are felt to be closer to sources. Simon Ortiz was told by his grandfather, medicine man and elder of the kiva, "how we must sacredly concern ourselves with the people and the holy earth."⁴² He remembers how his words "were about how we must regard ourselves and others with compassion and love."⁴³ This belief permeates Ortiz's work. "My grandfather represented for me a link to the past that is important for me to hold in my memory because it is not only memory but knowledge that substantiates my present existence."⁴⁴ Ortiz writes, "He and the grandmothers and grandfathers before him thought about us as they lived, confirmed in their belief of a continuing life, and they brought out present beings into existence by the beliefs they held. The consciousness of that belief is what informs my present concerns with language, poetry and fiction."⁴⁵ Such a statement holds true for many Native American writers. Meaningful and continuous contact with the past is a source of great strength

in the present and for the future; it "releases] the energy of the impulse to help my people,"⁴⁶ as Ortiz phrases it. Such contact, he continues, constitutes the strength of "the oral tradition of speech, social and religious ritual, elders' counsel and advice, countless and endless stories, everyday event."⁴⁷

Likewise the editor of this volume has written of the spiritual connection he has maintained with the Kallam land, and the promise he made with his grandfather never to lose touch with his Coast Salish traditions, "never to abandon our cedar roots, never to forget any creature that shares this world, and never to allow or participate in a rape of the earth or the sea."⁴⁸ Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, in her poem "Grandfather at the Indian Health Clinic," depicts the old man as having great nobility; he is "averse to / an unceremonious world." In her "Journey," grandmothers are "old partisans of faith" and pass on their wisdom to their daughters. The old ones "go bare" for the present generation. Because of cultural genocide, all the survivors are ironically "sacristans." Yet the faith of the grandparents lives on in ceremonies and prevents total alienation or acculturation, despite the fact that "migration makes / new citizens of Rome."

Time and time again in Native American poetry one senses that grandparents are keepers of the faith, inspirational, powerful beings, symbols of rooted continuity, as in Mary TallMountain's "Mammya," Gail Tremblay's "To Grandmother on Her Going," and "Night Gives Old Woman the Word" (where she is the Earth itself). They are there again in Robert E. Davis's "At the Door of the Native Studies Director," Wendy Rose's "Too-wil" (where the old woman is a mountain), in Earle Thompson's "Mythology" (Thompson has said in his earlier biographical note for this volume that "obviously my roots lie in the oral tradition which I learned from listening to my grandfather telling legends"), in Lance Henson's "Grandfather" and "near twelve mile point," in Barney Bush's "The Memory Sire," and so on. This reverence, this presence, stands in stark contrast to non-Indian society with its headlong rush to jettison the past and its largely disjoint and separate generations.⁴⁹

If grandparents are physical links to the past, myth is the eternal contact. In white culture, "myths are simply lies" (Roberta Hill Whiteman, "For Heather, Entering Kindergarten"). But for the Native American artist, myths and traditions are "a shield / against the social and spiritual plague of twentieth century consumer culture."⁵⁰ Non-Indians have largely given up on myth, or else have created their own from various sources, something that has been happening since at least the Romantic period. Contemporary poets find Jung congenial because he directs them to archetypes that transcend any culture-specific origin. But the Native American poet has a rich variety of native myth to live in and draw on. He or she can draw upon specific characters, such as Raven, Mink, or Coyote—Coyote is rapidly becoming, in art and literature, a pan-Indian character. Or the poet can refer obliquely, relying on a certain shorthand connection to those in the know. And if, as readers, we are not in the know, we can make the same effort we would have to make if we were reading Greek or Russian literature. We may not

need to know stories and myths of people turning into deer, myths of reciprocal obligation, trust, and love (as in "The Man Who Married a Deer Woman" in Leonard Bloomfield's *Menomini Texts*).⁵¹ But such knowledge adds a timeless dimension to Louise Erdich's timely "feminist" poem "Jacklight." This poem is a story of the need for the violent male principle to be inducted into the deep female woods. (I am not suggesting that Erdich knew this Menomini version of the myth, though versions are widespread.)

Myth is vital if we are to retain a sense of "the orchestration and recognition of life energies,"⁵² Frederick Turner has written. Myths are celebrations in which even dark tides of existence "lend the richness and tone of reality itself."⁵³ Thus, Turner continues, "living myths must include and speak of the interlocking cycles of animate and vegetable life, of water, sun, and even the stones, which have their own stories. It must embrace without distinction the phenomenal and the numinous. In such ways these vital fictions turn us toward the unchanged realities we must live amidst. They may yet prove to be our most successful response to life on this earth."⁵⁴ Native American poetry uses myth vitally, revitalizing it, feeding it from the source. Thus, in Leslie Silko's "Toe'osh: A Laguna Pueblo Coyote Story," the ancient mythic Coyote figure becomes a contemporary resident of Laguna, and in the last stanza is transformed into an Indian poet scattering "white people / out of bars all over Wisconsin."⁵⁵ And one of the most visionary, mystic poets today is Ray Young Bear, who creates from the deep base of the native tradition of the dream and from the surrealist alchemy of the unconscious—the "merveilleux."⁵⁶

Balancing Life: A Journey toward Wholeness

What is striking about Native American poetry is not the bitterness or anger, though they are there. Nor is it the sense of loss, of living divided in two worlds, or alienation, though they are there too. What is impressive is the courage to continue, to write poetry that uses all the resources of the English language, a language clearly loved for its "beauty and poetic power."⁵⁷ There is energy and joy in existence; there is song and dance. Scott Momaday sings in his "The Delight Song of Tsoal-Talee," "You see, I am alive, I am alive,"⁵⁸ and Joy Harjo reaches way beyond psychic dualism in "She Had Some Horses."⁵⁹ She releases her fear in "I Give You Back," and transforms hatred in "Transformations." There is humor and comedy from Louise Erdich's "Old Man Potchikoo" to Leslie Silko's "Toe'osh." And laughter is needed, because "who would believe / the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival / those who were never meant / to survive?" (Joy Harjo, "Anchorage"). The poems in this collection reach for balance, for sanity in a mad world, in the face of antagonism, past and present. One sees a desire for wholeness—for balance, reconciliation, and healing—within the individual, the tribe, the community, the nation; one sees an *insistence* on these things, on growth, on rich survival. Gail Tremblay writes: "Change moves

relentlessly, / the pattern unfolding despite their planning. / We're always there—singing round dance / songs, remembering what supports / our life—impossible to ignore" ("Indian Singing in 20th Century America"). Coyote may often appear to be dead, but he always seems to survive—part of continuing metamorphosis and energetic change, a cosmic force including everything. As Paula Gunn Allen's mother told her: "Life is a circle, and everything has its place in it."⁶⁰ And there is always one more story.⁶¹ The great seas underground "have journeyed through the graveyards / of our loved ones, / turning in their graves / to carry the stories of life to air" (Linda Hogan, "To Light").

If contemporary "mainline" American poetry must have "rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems"⁶² to fuel its voracious engines; and if, "like a shark, it contains a shoe,"⁶³ and must swim "through the desert / Uttering cries that are almost human,"⁶⁴ then Native American poetry is something different. Clearly, it can absorb and digest, though the preferred metaphor is different: "like the spider / we weave new beds around us / when old ones are swept away" (Linda Hogan, "To Light"). It is thoroughly modern. But it is not predatory, self-absorbed. And it is not a shark in the desert; it is not "almost human," but *human*. Its whole thrust is toward completeness of life, even in the desert. As Simon Ortiz writes:

You see, son, the eagle is a person the way it lives; it means it has to do with paying attention to where it is, not the center of the earth especially, but part of it, one part among all parts, and that's only the beginning.⁶⁵

Notes

1. Frederick E. Hoxie, "Red Man's Burden," *The Anthoch Review* 37 (Summer 1979): 340.
2. I recently received through the mail a brochure for videocassettes available from Film for the Humanities (Princeton, NJ). The series was entitled "The West of the Imagination." Here is part of the copy for the episode "The Trail of Tears": "As explorers and pioneers travelled further and further west, the urge and the technological means to expand led inevitably to the seizure of Indian land and the destruction of Indian culture." And this from "The Warpath": "Indians were the major obstacle to westward expansion. The pioneering American spirit overcame all obstacles. . . ." "Inevitably," "obstacles," "pioneering American spirit"—enough said.
3. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking, 1971), 7.
4. William Carlos Williams, *In The American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1925), 39.
5. For background on this topic see Larry W. Burt, "Roots of the Native American Urban Experience: Relocation Policy in the 1950s,"

- in *The American Indian Quarterly* 10 (Spring 1986): 85–99. See also a number of works cited in the footnotes to Burt's essay. Useful, on a wider scale, is James S. Olson and Raymond Wilson's *Native Americans in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), despite qualifications expressed by Vine Deloria Jr. in the same issue of *The American Indian Quarterly* cited above (pp. 136–37). A national disgrace on a huge scale is now unfolding in Alaska. Native peoples could lose all their land and have their tribal and subsistence way of life destroyed by 1991 if something isn't done soon to undo the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, which is attempting to turn these peoples into corporate businesspeople and shareholders. A powerful book on this is Thomas R. Berger's *Village Journey* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985).
6. See A. LaVonne Ruoff, "American Indian Authors, 1774–1899," in *Critical Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. Andrew Wiget (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1985), 191–202. Also see Daniel F. Littlefield and James W. Parins's *A Bibliography of Native American Writers, 1772–1924* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1981) and their *Supplement* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1985).
7. For a sharp critique of their approach, particularly A. Grove Day's, see William Bevis's essay, "American Indian Verse Translations," *College English* 35 (March 1974): 693–703.
8. A useful list of publishers today can be found in Kenneth Lincoln's *Native American Renaissance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 285–292. Joseph Bruchac provides a "Bibliography and List of Presses" in "American Indians Today," a special issue edited by Elaine Jahner, in *Book Forum* vol. V, no. 3 (1981): 336–342.
9. Andrew Wiget, *Native American Literature* (Boston: Twayne, 1985). (The quote is from the section "Chronology," no page number given.) Despite the appearance of *Carriers of the Dream Wheel*, however, Native American poetry could still be largely ignored by the white "establishment." In a major compilation of essays entitled *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, edited by Daniel Hoffman and issued by Harvard University Press in 1979, more space is devoted to reworkings of Native American texts by David Wagoner, Gary Snyder, and Jerome Rothenberg than to the work of Native American writers. The only Native American poets mentioned are in Hoffman's chapter "Poetry: Schools of Dissidents." Momaday, Niatum, Ortiz, and Bruchac are given a princely half page in a 618-page book! One hopes that with books such as Paul Lauter's *Reconstructing American Literature* published by Feminist Press in 1983, and associated attempts to reorder the canon (including Lauter's forthcoming anthology from D. C. Heath), things will be changed, if only a little.

10. On this subject, see Arnold Krupat's "An Approach to Native American Texts," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (December 1982): 323-338, and "Native American Literature and the Canon," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (September 1983): 145-171. *Studies in American Indian Literature*, ed. Paula Gunn Allen (New York: Modern Language Association, 1983) contains useful essays on teaching and course outlines.
 11. Vine Deloria, Jr., "Introduction," in *Voices From Wab-Kon-Tab*, ed. Robert Dodge and Joseph B. McCullough (New York: International Publishers, 1975).
 12. Wendy Rose, "American Indian Poets and Publishing," *Book Forum* vol. V, no. 3 (1981): 402.
 13. Duane Niatum, "On Stereotypes," *Parranssus* vol. 7, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1978): 160.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. Jim Barnes, "On Native Ground," in *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays By Native American Writers*, ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1987). Page numbers unavailable at time of writing.
 16. Fritz Scholder, "The Native American and Contemporary Art: A Dilemma," *Book Forum*, vol. V, no. 3. (1981): 423.
 17. Quoted in the Introduction to *I Tell You Now*.
 18. Quoted in the Introduction to *I Tell You Now*.
 19. Linda Hogan, "Who Will Speak," *Sparanth* 4 (Summer/Fall 1979): 28-30. This special Native American issue was edited by Roberta Hill [Whiteman] and Brian Swann.
 20. The situation is complex. The issue is discussed in Vine Deloria, Jr. and Clifford Lytle's *American Indians, American Justice* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983) and *The Nations Within* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), as well as in *Indian Lives*, ed. L. G. Moses and Raymond Wilson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980).
 21. James Welch, "The Only Good Indian," *South Dakota Review* 9 (Summer 1971): 54.
 22. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "You May Consider Speaking About Your Art," in *I Tell You Now*, ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).
 23. Richard Hugo, "Introduction," *The American Poetry Review* (November/December 1975).
 24. *Ibid.*, 22.
 25. *Ibid.*
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. *Ibid.*
 28. *Ibid.*
 29. *Ibid.*
 30. *Ibid.*
 31. *Ibid.*
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32. A similar pattern can be seen in Welch's novel *Winter in the Blood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). The world is still bleak and absurd at the end, but there is some possibility of healing "if only a connection could be made between the old people and the young ones" and a reconnection established with the animals—in other words, if there could be a return to tradition. See Carter Revard, "Deer Talk, Coyote Songs, Meadowlark Territory: The Muses Dance to Our Drum Now" (Paper presented at the Modern Language Association Convention, New York, December 1979). I would like to thank Carter Revard for a careful reading of this introductory essay and for some helpful suggestions.
 33. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (New York: Pocket Books, 1959), 165.
 34. David Guss, "Keeping It Oral: A Yekwana Ethnology," *American Ethnologist* 13 (August 1986): 423.
 35. *Ibid.*
 36. *Ibid.*
 37. N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 88.
 38. The oral tradition is based as much on rumor and gossip (entities located lowest on the literary scale and associated with the "ignorant") as much as anything else. "We make no distinctions between the stories—whether they are history, whether they are fact, whether they are gossip," says Leslie Silko in "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," in *English Literature: Opening Up the Canon*, ed. Leslie A. Friedler and Houston A. Baker (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 60. The impulse is to leave nothing out, to be inclusive—to create communal truth, not an absolute. See Silko's essay "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination," *Antaeus* 57 (Autumn 1986).
 39. Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*, 90.
 40. Simon Ortiz, *Song, Poetry, and Language—Expression and Perception*. Occasional Papers, vol. III (Music and Dance Series), no. 5 (Tsalie, AZ: Navajo Community Press, 1977), 4. In passing, the "thousand year old man" is close to Valéry's definition of the true poet, *un homme très ancien*.
 41. Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Literature* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 46.
 42. Simon Ortiz, "The Language We Know," in *I Tell You Now*, ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).
 43. *Ibid.*
 44. *Ibid.*
 45. *Ibid.*
 46. *Ibid.*
 47. *Ibid.*

48. Duane Niatum, "Autobiographical Sketch of Duane Niatum," in *I Tell You Now*, ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).
49. "Grandfather" was an honorific title with religious overtones in many native societies. In *Black Elk Speaks*, for instance, the six grandfathers symbolize Wakan Tanka, the "Great Mysterious," the power of the six directions. "Understood as grandfathers, these spirits were represented as kind and loving, full of years and wisdom," writes Raymond J. Denallie, *The Sixth Grandfather* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), xix.
50. Niatum, "Autobiographical Sketch," in *I Tell You Now*.
51. Leonard Bloomfield, *Menomini Texts* (New York: AMS Press, 1974), 536-555.
52. Frederick Turner, *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 18.
53. *Ibid.*, 19.
54. *Ibid.*
55. In *Songs from this Earth on Turtle's Back*, ed. Joseph Bruchac, (Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review Press, 1983), 229.
56. It would be difficult to demonstrate the effect of a poet's original language on his or her poetry. But, as Joseph Bruchac has noted, "When you speak English / with the memory / of a first tongue / still sweet in your throat / it comes out different." These lines are from "November at Onandaga" in *Entering Onandaga* (Austin, TX: Cold Mountain Press, 1978), 16. Ray Young Bear is one of the few Native American poets who is bilingual in a "first tongue" and English. The jacket notes to Young Bear's *Winter of the Salamander* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980) tell us that the poet "began thinking his poems in his native tongue then translating them verbatim. Through ten years of writing he has refined his technique so that the poems while no longer word-for-word translations, have become, in essence, an authentic Native American experience, finalized in English."
57. Ortiz, "The Language We Know," in *I Tell You Now*.
58. *Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back*, 158.
59. Joy Harjo discusses this poem with Paula Gunn Allen in the latter's *The Sacred Hoop*, 166.
60. Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 1.
61. Simon Ortiz, "Telling," in *A Good Journey* (Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island, 1977), 39. This poem is a good example of the oral tradition at work since it draws on many past stories as well as many in the present. Leslie Silko draws on the poem to make up her own story, "Skeleton Fixer's Story," which first appeared in *Sun Tracks* vol. 4 (1978): 2-3. It is, she says, "a piece of a bigger story they tell around Laguna and Acoma too—from a version told by Simon Ortiz." (In a
- recent letter to me, Simon Ortiz, after reading a draft of this essay, asks, "Does Leslie draw on the source I give to make her own Skeleton Fixer story? The answer is that both of us draw upon the traditions we know—and it is a good example of the creative continuing work of the oral tradition." I would like to thank Simon Ortiz for a careful reading of this introductory essay and for some helpful suggestions.
62. Louis Simpson, "American Poetry," in *At the End of the Open Road* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 25.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*
65. Simon Ortiz, "What's Your Indian Name," part of "Four Poems for a Child Son," in *Going For the Rain* (Harper & Row, 1976), 7.