

“Some upsetting is necessary”: Native American Literary Criticism in the Late 20th Century

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Abstract:

The aim of this essay is to provide a general overview of the most influential publications by contemporary Native American critics in the last fifteen years of the 20th century, and of how they address issues of indigenous feminism, ethics, domestic colonialism, and sovereignty while, at the same time, debunking anthropological and ethnographical arguments in relation to Indian writing – “circular,” “non-Aristotelian,” based on “oral tradition” and “ceremony” – and the “Indian mind,” always described as “nonlinear.” These critics also challenge the frequent accusations of isolationism and essentialism, arguing that sovereignty is not an isolationist position, since tribal governments exist in complex relationships with local, state and federal powers that demand constant movement between and across borders.

Keywords: native criticism, identity, sovereignty, tribalism, Indianness

Resumo:

O objetivo deste ensaio é passar em revista algumas das mais influentes publicações de críticos/as americanos/as nativos/as contemporâneos/as dos últimos quinze anos do século XX, prestando particular atenção à maneira como problematizam questões de feminismo indígena, crítica e ética, colonialismo interno e soberania, ao mesmo tempo que desmontam teses antropológicas e etnográficas sobre a escrita de índios – “circular”, “não-aristotélica”, assente na “tradição oral” e em “rituais” –, sem esquecer o “pensamento índio”, sempre descrito como “não-linear”. Alguns destes críticos refutam igualmente as acusações de isolacionismo e de essencialismo de que são alvo frequente, argumentando que defender a soberania não é uma posição isolacionista, uma vez que os governos tribais se veem na necessidade de estabelecer relações complexas com poderes locais, estaduais e federais, obrigando a um movimento constante entre fronteiras e através delas.

Palavras-chave: crítica nativa, identidade, soberania, tribalismo, indianidade

Résumé

L’objectif de cet essai est de passer en revue quelques-unes des publications de critiques américains (es) natifs (ves) contemporains (es) les plus influentes des quinze dernières années du XXe siècle, en prêtant un regard particulier sur leurs problématiques concernant le féminisme indigène, la critique et l’éthique, le colonialisme interne et la souveraineté, et comment celles-ci démontent les thèses anthropologiques et ethnographiques sur les écrits des indiens – écriture «circulaire», «non-aristotélienne», basée sur la «tradition orale» et sur des «rituels», sans oublier la «pensée indienne», toujours décrite comme «non linéaire». Ces critiques, hommes et femmes réfutent également les accusations d’isolacionisme et d’essentialisme dont ils sont souvent la cible, en argumentant que la défense de la souveraineté n’est pas

une position isolationniste, puisque les gouvernements tribaux ont besoin d'établir des relations complexes avec les pouvoirs locaux, étatiques et fédéraux, et cela provoque un mouvement constant et obligé inter et transfrontaliers.

Mots-clés : critique native, identité, souveraineté, tribalisme, indienne

1

The fact that American Indians had taken over Alcatraz in 1969, occupied the BIA building in Washington, D.C., in 1972, and laid siege at Wounded Knee in 1973 made them jump from the History books, where they were supposed to rest for all eternity, to contemporaneity. Before 1973 anything published that might have called itself something like Native American Literature would have contained creation stories, songs, and chants translated into English from the original Native languages. After 1973, a book calling itself Native American Literature would contain short stories, poems, plays, excerpts from novels. The time had come for Native authors to think of themselves as a community of modern artists.

Simon Ortiz's 1981 essay "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism" (MELUS 8.2 Summer 1981, 7-12) set the foundations on which many of the native critics that followed would establish their theoretical framework. Since the beginning of colonization, says Ortiz, "Indian songmakers and story-tellers have created a body of oral literature which speaks crucially about the experience of colonization" (1981: 10). In this creative process, they have used the languages of the invaders "and used them for their own purposes" (Ortiz, 1981: 10). What Ortiz implies here is that the native peoples of North America had the vision of using English (and French) as an Indian language, just as the indigenous peoples of Meso and South America did with Spanish and Portuguese. More: by doing so, they insured their own survival for generations at the same time they were committing an act of resistance. Ortiz also debunks the cliché that Indians and their native languages were victims of English, having been forced to "forsake their native selves":

Along with their native languages, Indian women and men have carried on their lives and their expression through the use of the newer languages, particularly Spanish, French, and English, and they have used these languages on their own terms. This is the crucial item that has to be understood, that it is entirely possible for a people to retain and maintain their lives through the use of any language. There is not a question of authenticity here; rather, it is the way that Indian people

have creatively responded to forced colonization. And this response has been one of resistance; there is no clearer word for it than resistance. (1981: 10)

Ortiz's celebration of the profound Indianness of English challenges two ideas common to certain critics: that there is an unbridgeable abyss between English and Indian languages, and "that when Indians write novels, poems, stories, and plays they are [...] engaged in an act of hybridity because of the supposed European origins of language and literary endeavors" (Weaver et al., 2006: xviii). For Ortiz, there seems to be nothing specially unindian about the use of "traditional" Western literary genres. He makes his point using a religious argument (talking about Acoma feast days):

Obviously, there is an overtone this is a Catholic Christian ritual celebration because of the significance of the saints' names and days on the Catholic calendar. But just as obviously, when the ceremony is held within the Acqumeh community, it is an Acqumeh ceremony. It is Acqumeh and Indian [...] in the truest and most authentic sense. This is so because this celebration speaks of the creative ability of Indian people to gather in many forms of the socio-political colonizing force which beset them and to make these forms meaningful in their own terms. In fact, it is a celebration of the human spirit and the Indian struggle for liberation.

Many Christian religious rituals brought to the Southwest (which in the 16th century was the northern frontier of the Spanish New World) are no longer Spanish. They are now Indian because of the creative development that the native people applied to them. Present-day Native American or Indian literature is evidence of this in the very same way. (1981: 8)

To the appropriation of English as a native language Ortiz adds the transformation of Catholic rituals into something Indian.

In his foreword to Jace Weaver, Robert Warrior and Craig Womack's *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, Ortiz reaffirms the Indigenous oral tradition "and the knowledge-experience it conveys [...] as the basis of our human cultural Existence" (2006: viii). The implications of these words are clear: when an Indian writes s/he is also speaking. The cultural existence Ortiz speaks about is only possible when Indians gain consciousness of themselves as cultural beings through speaking-writing, "since speaking-writing expresses our continuing Existence as Indigenous people" (Ortiz, 2006: ix). And cultural consciousness is the starting point for cultural sovereignty through the dynamic process of cultural identity:

The dynamic of cultural identity is not wholly dependent upon spoken language [...]. In fact, Indigenous identity is more than what is provided by oral tradition; Indigenous identity simply

cannot be dependent only upon Indigenous languages no matter how intact the languages are. Because identity has to do with a way of life that has its own particularities, patterns, uniqueness, structures, and energy. Because Indigenous identity cannot simply be attributed to only one quality, aspect, or function of culture. Because identity has to be relevant and pertinent to other elements and factors having to do with land, culture, and community. (2006: xi)

For large sections of Euro-American society, Indians are no more, and real Indians, much less. Their culture has disappeared, at least what made it different from other cultures. How can they be Indians if they don't speak Indian anymore? Ortiz answers this "official" point of view by stating that, despite all the attempts to annihilate them, physically and culturally, "Indians are still Indians," addressing issues about land, culture, and community throughout the Americas. "This means Indigenous peoples have completely relied upon their Indigeneity to state their case for sovereignty in cultural and self-governance matters" (Ortiz, 2006: xii).

Although there is an understandable concern about the progressive loss of Indigenous languages in the whole hemisphere, Indians have the chance of seizing the colonial languages that have been used to oppress and victimize them, using them for their "own purposes," as Ortiz wrote in his 1981 essay. Where English is concerned, says Ortiz, "we must determine for ourselves how English is to be a part of our lives socially, culturally, and politically" (2006: xiv). Most of the critics whose work is the object of my analysis were deeply influenced by Ortiz's ideas on nationalism, cultural consciousness/continuity, indigeneity, and sovereignty (cultural and political).

2

During the 1970s, some European critical works rocked the theoretical thought. Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, and Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* are some relevant examples. The publication of these books is roughly coincident with the publication of the first book-length critical works by Native American literary critics – some of them also poets and novelists –, and with profound changes in federal Indian policy, as well as in literature departments within American universities. But, one might ask, how do these apparently disparate events interrelate?

Let me take Bakhtin's book as an example. *The Dialogic Imagination* was published the same year the United States Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination Act (1975), an act aiming to give back to tribes some prerogatives of self-government they had lost with the Termination and Relocation laws of the 1940s and the 1950s. In "Discourse in the Novel," the last of the four essays of *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin criticizes the formalist perspective of texts as autonomous objects – as stylistic objects –, severing them from external contexts and the living reality of language:

More often than not, stylistics defines itself as a stylistics of "private craftsmanship" and ignores the social life of discourse outside the artist's study, discourse in the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities and villages, of social groups, generations and epochs. Stylistics is concerned not with living discourse but with a histological specimen made from it, with abstract linguistic discourse in the service of an artist's individual creative powers. But these individual and tendentious overtones of style, cut off from the fundamentally social modes in which discourse lives, inevitably come across as flat and abstract in such a formulation and cannot therefore be studied in organic unity with a work's semantic components. (1981: 259)

For Bakhtin, the novel "as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" and "can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (1981: 261-62). Bakhtin uses the term "heteroglossia," for which the novel should be celebrated:

The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types [...] and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [...] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). (1981: 263)

According to Craig Womack, it probably was this Bakhtin's "communal orientation" that explains why so many scholars of Native American literature were attracted to his work in the early 1990s (Womack et al., 2008: 4).

Anthologies have played a major role in drawing attention to the work of contemporary Native American authors, poets in particular. In 1969, the *South Dakota Review* published a special issue entitled "The American Indian Speaks." The magazine's editor, John Milton, a non-Indian, recognized the potential of

contemporary Native American writing and continually published Indian authors when most publications ignored them. That special issue was republished as a book in the same year and, according to Joseph Bruchac, “[it] was the first real anthology of contemporary Native American Writing. Such important authors as James Welch, Janet Campbell Hale, Bea Medicine, and Simon Ortiz were among the more than forty writers and artists included” (1996: 317).

During the 1970s and 1980s dozens of anthologies of Indian contemporary writing were published, the majority from small presses, but also sometimes from major publishers. Benet Tvedten’s 1971 *An American Indian Anthology* (Blue Cloud Abbey), Dick Lourie’s 1974 *Come to Power* (The Crossing Press), Diane Niatum’s 1975 *Carriers of the Dream Wheel* (Harper & Row), David Day and Marilyn Bowering’s 1977 Canadian Native writers anthology *Many Voices* (J. J. Douglas), Joseph Bruchac’s 1983 *Songs from This Earth on Turtle’s Back* (Greenfield Review Press) and Diane Niatum’s 1988 *Harper’s Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry* (Harper & Row) are among the most important anthologies. A special reference is due to Geary Hobson’s *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, published in 1979 by Hobson’s own Red Earth Press, which, in the words of Joseph Bruchac, “remains [...] the best single introduction to the range of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction work by contemporary American Indian writers” (1996: 318).

Simon Ortiz’s 1983 *Earth Power Coming: Short Fiction in Native American Literature* is of special interest in the area of Indian short fiction but also because it was published by a tribal college (Navajo Community College Press). Rayna Green’s 1984 *That’s What She Said* (Indiana University Press), an anthology of Native women’s fiction and poetry, and Beth Brant’s *A Gathering of the Spirit*, also published in 1984 as a special issue of *Sinister Wisdom* magazine, including a large representation of lesbian authors and women prisoners, testify to the strength and power of women’s voices in contemporary Indian writing. About the latter anthology wrote Craig Womack:

More than anything that had been published to that point, it broke with established notions of literary merit, the makeup of the canon, and modernist aesthetics. And this was before cultural studies was really beginning to take hold. By virtue of its very existence it demonstrated the hegemonic nature of literary inclusion in mainstream society. (2008: 14)

These early anthologies had the effect of creating a community of Indian writers who knew each other's work, which, in turn, raised awareness about it in the critical realm. Early anthologies of critical essays on Native American Literature edited by non-Indian authors include Abraham Chapman's *Literature of the American Indians* (1975), Karl Kroeber's *Traditional American Indian Literatures* (1981), Brian Swann's *Smoothing the Ground* (1983), Andrew Wiget's *Critical Essays on Native American Literature* (1985), and Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat's *Recovering the Word* (1987). When speaking of single-authored full-length books, Alan Velie's *Four American Indian Literary Masters* (1982), Kenneth Lincoln's *Native American Renaissance* (1983), and Andrew Wiget's *Native American Literature* (1985) deserve special mention. However, with the partial exception of Andrew Wiget, for these early non-Indian critics Indian literature seems to have had its starting point with the publication of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, in 1968. In Kenneth Lincoln's words, "[t]he Native American renaissance here targeted, less than two decades of published Indian literature, is a written renewal of oral traditions translated into Western literary forms" (1985: 8). What was a two-hundred year literature like before it was resuscitated?

The most evident outcome of this first non-Indian scholarship was the canonization of five Native literary works, all of them novels: Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974), Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), and Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984). Still today, these are the Native authors of fiction, with a little Louis Owens here and some Sherman Alexie there, that get the spotlight of critical attention. The high-modernist literary techniques used by these writers, validated by non-Indians critics, legitimized their works as literary texts, something that was denied to a large corpus of Indian writing, which, from a cultural point of view, was still seen as based on "oral tradition" and "ceremony," omitting the literary history of and the changes in oral tradition over time.

The works mentioned in the beginning of this chapter are all European male texts. In the 1980s, there was another radical turn in the theoretical and literary worlds. Feminism engendered deep changes in poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, gay and lesbian studies, as well as semiotics. In the field of literary theory, feminism began by evaluating how sociolinguistic structures

inform social systems, while at the same time that it worked to create alternative models of reading and writing. As feminists of colour started playing an increasingly important role, together with the emergence of gender studies in the early 1980s, feminism's field of study was considerably enlarged. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) was certainly one of the most relevant contributions to feminism by women of colour. According to Ian Barnard,

[i]t was the first articulation in a collective, systematic, and widely publicized form of the voices of feminists of color in the United States and their critiques of the racism and classism that had characterized much canonized feminist thinking and writing of the 1970s and 1980s. (2013: 50)

Something that is also remarkable about this anthology, adds Ian Barnard, is "its full engagement with lesbian concerns and voices, and the non-tokenistic presence of lesbian writers in all sections of the book" (2013: 50). Both Anzaldúa and Moraga also identify as lesbians and Chicanas.

Before going through Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop*, I deem appropriate to make a brief reference to Elaine Showalter's "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1979). In this text Showalter coined the term "gynocriticism," referring to the development of a uniquely female aesthetic and an alternative, women's literary tradition:

[...] the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. (2012: 28)

3

Paula Gunn Allen was the first Native American to publish a book-length work of literary criticism. In *The Sacred Hoop. Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986), Allen addresses issues of identity (especially "mixedblood" experience), Native feminism, authenticity, and culture. In her introduction to the volume, she identifies seven "major themes" that pervade the essays that follow. According to Cheryl Suzack, "Allen's analysis represents one of the earliest attempts by a cultural critic to restore gender analysis to a consideration of the organizing politics

of community practices” (2008: 177). In “Kochinnenako in Academe: Three Approaches to Interpreting a Keres Indian Tale,” Allen makes what she calls “some theoretical considerations:

Analysing tribal cultural systems from a mainstream feminist point of view allows an otherwise overlooked insight into the complex interplay of factors that have led to the systematic loosening of tribal ties, the disruption of tribal cohesion and complexity, and the growing disequilibrium of cultures that were anciently based on a belief in balance, relationship, and the centrality of women, particularly elder women. A feminist approach reveals not only the exploitation and oppression within the tribes by whites and by white government but also areas of oppression within the tribes and the sources and nature of that oppression. To a large extent, such an analysis can provide strategies for the tribes to reclaim their ancient gynarchical,¹ egalitarian, and sacred traditions. (1992: 223)

Allen’s book was published on the eve of a critical turn in feminist theory, with the new gender studies challenging gender categories themselves, problematizing terms like “female” and “feminine.” *The Sacred Hoop* is somewhat in the middle of the early theorists looking for a woman’s literature, recovering silenced/forgotten women’s voices and developing at the same time a uniquely female aesthetic, and the later theorists who called into question the term “female” itself, “while safeguarding their own set of favorite books that demonstrate their principles, books that undermine distinctions between genders, where the categories themselves seem to break down” (Womack, 2008: 22).

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), published less than four years after Allen’s book, is probably the most famous example of the shift in feminist theory I have mentioned above. Butler argues that feminism fell into the trap of asserting that “women” were a group with common characteristics and interests – a stable, knowable and universal subject –, an assumption that Butler says is “an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations” (1990: 5). She proposes a “genealogical critique” (ix) of gender categories, stating that “it may be time to entertain a radical critique that seeks to free feminist theory from the necessity of

¹ In a number of essays, Allen also uses terms as “ginocracy” and “gynecentric” [cultures]. I think that Elaine Showalter’s creation of the term “gynocriticism” in her famous essay “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1979) influenced Allen’s feminist thinking, and if many women are “brave,” Allen was one of them when she dared to write a chapter on lesbianism in a Native studies book. But it seems that she didn’t go as far as to recognize a dynamic relationship between feminism and lesbianism, as Adrienne Rich did in her 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.”

having to construct a single or abiding ground” (Butler, 1990: 5). Extremely important for the discussion of Native literary and cultural theory is Judith Butler’s assertion that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (1990: 25). Translation: gender is a performance. It is a matter of what you do (at particular moments) instead of a universal (essentialist) who you are.

I have already underlined the contributions of women of colour to gender theory. They have insisted since the very beginning that race and class affect the way women experience oppression and resistance, contesting at the same time a universalized feminism. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, published the same year as *The Sacred Hoop*, Gloria Anzaldúa “writes of the borderlands between the United States and Mexico, between and within cultures, genders, genres, languages, and the self”, says Ian Barnard (2013: 51). And Barnard goes on:

Her work insistently refuses to prioritize any one component of her identity. [...] But it is precisely Anzaldúa’s multiple and enigmatic self-positioning and social relegation in and outside identities, canons, and institutions that offer the greatest challenge to queer theorists and activists, and to critics of lesbian and gay literatures. [...] Anzaldúa contests liberal pluralist delineations of lesbian and gay subjectivity merely in terms of identity or lifestyle, instead positing a politicized queerness that reclaims the revolutionary roots of gay liberation in its radical interconnectedness with all struggles against oppression. (2013: 51)

Paula Gunn Allen was accused of essentialism precisely because of the way she treated Indian identity, “as well as reductive statements about what seems to be a universalized Indian worldview, consciousness, and epistemology,” writes Craig Womack (2008: 22). Indian identity and gender identity, however, don’t necessarily coincide. To say that gender is not who we are but what we do, as Butler does, is one thing; to say that Indians are not who they are but what they do is quite another. And “Indian as performance” is not a fashionable idea in Indian country.

Allen’s insistence on contrasting Indians with Europeans was an attempt to deal with the complicated problem of theorizing difference. “While contrasting Indians with Europeans, however, Allen often reduced diversity among Native people to a gynocratic utopia and made other totalizing statements about a singular Indian consciousness,” says Womack (2008: 23). The idea is that she failed to take into account Indian diversity across and within tribes. Nonetheless, the way she reads

feminist content in the context of traditional Keres ritual “seems to enact a form of ‘tribal feminism’” that, in Cheryl Suzack words, “privileges a self-actualizing feminist consciousness as enabling social transformation at the expense of illustrating how tribal communal values connect with feminist agency” (2008: 177). If there is a physical (and verifiable) manifestation of ritual, which is one of Allen’s most important arguments, her sometimes antimaterialist stance seems to collide with her argument:

Ritual-based cultures are founded on the primary assumption that the universe [...] is supernaturally ordered. That is, they do not perceive economic, social, or political elements as central [...]. If they see a cause-and-effect relationship between events, they would ascribe the cause to the operation of nonmaterial energies or forces [...]. Thus ritual – organized activity that strives to manipulate or direct nonmaterial energies toward some larger goal – forms the foundation of tribal culture. (1992: 80)

Without naming Allen, it seems clear that Suzack is addressing her ideas on this issue when she posits that “[a] materialist Native literary practice that identifies the social effects of cultural work and its political imbrications in colonial history would get beyond the self-evident form of discursive practice that relies solely on ‘telling our story’ criticism” (2008: 175).

The Sacred Hoop is probably the most well-known Native American literary critical work and a best-seller in its field of study. It had a huge impact on disciplines other than Native literature – women’s studies, gender studies and queer studies, to mention the most important ones. It was also popular outside the academy, particularly among those more prone to a spirit-based understanding of the universe, something ignored in the most fashionable theoretical discussions of the day. Craig Womack puts it in a very clear manner when he says that particularly in minority studies “a fear existed among academics in regard to speaking out about spirituality and being perceived as a throwback, someone representing himself as an academic while still listening to his ancestors on the sly” (2008: 24). *The Sacred Hoop* was extremely relevant in its recognition of how important it was to include religious issues in theoretical discussions. Last but not least, it is also important to stress the importance of Allen’s book immediately after the retribalization period of the sixties and the seventies, a direct result of the Indian struggles, as Native people looked for renewed connections with traditions that had either been outlawed or discouraged.

I have taken some space giving my critical attention to *The Sacred Hoop* because of its groundbreaking quality and its importance for the theoretical discussions that followed. Now I will necessarily have to make a long story short regarding the rest of the works I deem of great importance in the field of Native American literary criticism. In the early 1990s, cultural studies challenged the canon and dominant views of literature, turning our exclusive attention from the text to its context, and questioning the close-reading principles of the New Critics. One of the most significant aspects of cultural studies is the legitimization of what used to be considered “low culture,” due to its interest in (almost) everything, soap operas and advertising included. The literary canon came down of its divine pedestal to become a construct reflecting social and power relations within a given historical framework.

Cultural studies opened up the canon to minorities, to authors that had been pushed to the margins or totally forgotten, many of them women. The notion of author itself was challenged: “Cultural studies brings into view social groups who may not have created much literature but who have clearly participated in cultures – the poor and illiterate, the working classes, slaves, peasants, women, people of color, people with disabilities [...]” (Davis, 1997: 259). Cultural studies also stressed issues of cosmopolitanism and hybridity, problematizing ideas of pure and authentic cultures and focusing instead on cross-cultural dialogue. In the meanwhile, cultural studies denaturalized the idea of nation, “questioning, especially, the totalizing structures within the nation-state that create a monolithic story that overlooks diverse relations within, without, and across its real and imagined borders” (Womack, 2008: 37). If one thinks that nationalism is a key concept in Native studies which approach literature from a specific tribal point of view, the question for some critics is how to reconcile these apparently contradictory viewpoints. Robert Warrior addressed these problems in his *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (1996), as we shall see further on.

When Louis Owens and Greg Sarris published the works I will discuss here, cultural studies had already given a major contribution to the rejection of the notion that reading implies a solitary encounter between a reader and a text, and that the responses of readers are irrelevant. This is particularly valid in Sarris’s work, where reader-response theories are of central importance. Both Owens’s *Other Destinies:*

Understanding the American Indian Novel (1992) and Sarris's *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts* (1993) have in Mikhail Bakhtin's work their most important theoretical influence. Sarris and Owens apply concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia to the idea of reading across lines of cultural identity, arguing, says Elvira Pulitano, "for a hybridized, multidirectional, and multigeneric discursive mode" (2003: 102).

In his work, probably the most comprehensive study of Native fiction by the time it was published, Owens focuses on themes like popular culture's representation of Indians and the recovery of identity – Owens contrasts Indian fictional characters with intact identities, keeping a strong connection to traditions, with others who have fragmented identities and are at odds with the modern world –, and centres much of his analysis on the alienated protagonist, someone who makes his/her way from inarticulateness to speech, in a movement towards healing. In his analysis, Owens also looks for the "Indianness" of the Indian text, leading him to discuss the representation of the oral performance in Indian fiction. Although Elvira Pulitano, an Owens's disciple herself, in her *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* has placed Owens on the side of the dialogic, cross-cultural approach to Native American literature and Paula Gunn Allen on the essentialist end of the critical spectrum, there are some continuities between the two. Indian harmony vs. European fragmentation is a recurrent contrast in Owens work. Allen's distinction between outsider and insider in the ability to experience the Indian world is replicated in the following passage, where Owens analyses James Welch's historical novel *Fools Crow* (1986):

In the Blackfoot world rendered so completely in this novel, there is no disjunction between the real and the magical, no sense that the magical is metaphorical. In the world Welch recovers, Raven talks to men and women, the sacred and the profane interpenetrate irresistibly, and this is reality. If the reader can pass through that conceptual horizon, if the reader acknowledges and accepts this reality, he or she experiences an Indian world, that world forever distanced from the airplane man of Winter [in the Blood] and, more tragically, from the doomed Loney. In *Fools Crow*, Welch has accomplished the most profound act of recovery in American literature. (1992: 165-66)

Owens work, as Allen's, also deals with mixedblood experience – in 1998 he published a book with essays on literature, film, and environment titled *Mixedblood Messages* – and the recovery (or rearticulation) of an identity. In his introduction to *Other Destinies*, Owens writes that, for writers who identify as Native American, "the

novel represents a process of reconstruction, of self-discovery and cultural recovery. In Laguna author Paula Gunn Allen's term, it is a re-membering or putting together of identity" (1992: 5). Despite Pulitano, both critics are not as far apart as one might think.

Greg Sarris (who is Pomo-Miwok-Irish-Jewish), together with Owens, is the other "Bakhtinian" critic I will briefly refer to. In *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts* (1993), critical theory and storytelling overlap. Sarris's storytelling approach comprehends the discourse of social sciences and reader-response theories. The fundamental idea in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, writes Craig Womack, "is the role of participants' subjectivities in various kinds of cultural encounters, especially how their perspectives shape their views of culture, and, ultimately, how such views affect writings and the interpretations of experiences" (2008: 50). Unlike Sarris, the greater part of the reception aesthetics theorists rarely tell their own stories in their critical texts.

Along its eight essays, *Keep Slug Woman Alive* addresses topics ranging from orality and art to criticism and pedagogy. Mixing autobiography and theory, Sarris tells stories about his own life and particularly about his interactions with Mabel Mackay, a Cache-Pomo Indian basket weaver and medicine woman who raised him. "Mabel Mackay was one of the people who took me in, and from her I learned what is most important to me today" (1993: 11). The book begins with Sarris peeling potatoes in Mackay's kitchen together with several Pomo women, listening to the beginning of her story about "an old medicine man [...] who followed her around" (1993: 1). After having learned the lesson that "things are not always what they seem" (1993:3), he asks: "How do people read across cultures? What are the aims and consequences of their readings? How are their readings located in a certain history, say that of American Indian and Euro-American interrelations? Is there a way that people can read across cultures so that intercultural communication is opened rather than closed, so that people see more than just what things seem to be?" (1993: 3).

Unlike Allen and Owens, Sarris challenges a non-Indian/Indian oppositional framework, and instead of searching for what elders have to say, he is much more interested in "what happens to the elders and those who listen to them when they engage in conversation" (Womack, 2008: 53), thus opening and exploring "interpersonal and intercultural territories" (Pulitano, 2003: 104). It is this idea of "speaking to the tale" rather than "about it," as Trinh Minh-ha puts it (1991: 12), that is fundamental to Sarris's concept of intercultural communication. Sarris's integrative

approach breaks down artificial subject/object and genre barriers and at the same time that it pays attention to “who is telling the story and who is listening and the specific circumstances of the exchange” (1993: 4). The following passage elucidates the extent of the difference between Sarris’s theoretical stance and the one adopted by Allen and Owens:

This book should not be taken simply as an insider’s record of things “Indian.” I am not privileging and Indian’s point of view regarding the texts and topics considered. I am not interested in pitting Indians against non-Indians, insiders against outsiders, or in showing that any group of people is necessarily privileged or better or worse than another. Instead, these essays try to show that all of us can and should talk to one another, that each group can inform and be informed by the other. (1993: 7)

Sarris critical approach also leads him to argue that what some critics have often considered to be the “oral tradition,” is a reductive representation of a much broader and dynamic complex of interrelationships, saying that some studies of orality are “no more the whole story than a cup of water is the river” (1993: 40).

The two final essays of *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* are Sarris’s attempt to put theory to the test in the classroom. The final chapter is particularly powerful. In “The Challenge of Reading in a Reservation Classroom,” Sarris analyses the failure of teachers’ attempts to instruct Pomo children on a Kashaya Pomo Reservation in traditional Pomo stories, culture, and language. The children’s resistance to their own culture, Sarris concludes, originated in the way the story was presented to them, as something imposed from the outside in a “depersonalized” way, a lifeless text telling them “what an Indian is,” allowing no room for discussions. The storyteller, in Sarris’s case – mediator, critic, teacher –, must constantly scrutinize his own position “with regard to both the story and the students’ response to it so that the story is always created anew, so that communication remains open and ongoing” (Pulitano, 2003: 123).

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s stance in the field of Native American Studies has been regarded by other critics as more based on polemics than on theory. I think that this is a mostly unfair criticism. Cook-Lynn (Santee Sioux) has long been pleading for an ethical relationship between literature and Native communities and has put land redress in the centre of her critical work. Arnold Krupat wrote that her 1993 essay

“Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, the Third World, and Tribal Sovereignty” was perhaps “the strongest and best account of the ‘nationalist,’ ‘nativist,’ and ‘anti-cosmopolitan’ position” in evaluating Native American literatures (1996: 4). According to Cook-Lynn, cosmopolitanism in Third World literary decolonization theory erases the quest for sovereignty and tribalism that legitimates Indian nations. It is true that her critique of certain writers on the issue of mixed-blood ideology was not convincing because she focused herself more on naming the problem a mixed-blood one, instead of discussing the ideology. There is an interesting exchange between Cook-Lynn and Louis Owens on this matter.²

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn published *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice* in 1996. Because she subtitled her work *A Tribal Voice* she was the target of some harsh criticism, namely by Elvira Pulitano, in her already mentioned book. I tend to agree with Craig Womack when he says that there is “no theoretical justification for claiming that a tribal perspective, a sovereigntist perspective [...] is an inherently isolated one [...],” and that, by definition, sovereignty implies government-to-government relations, and “has everything to do with inside and outside, with relations across and between borders” (Womack ,2008: 75). A “tribal voice” doesn't mean “cultural purity” but the right of a people to speak on their own behalf. Writes Cook-Lynn:

The emergence of this [tribal] voice has little to do with the fear that the very concept of academic standards must be altered, though perhaps it must. It has less to do with the inaccuracies or simplistic views of cultural difference which are deplored as racist or politically correct or incorrect depending upon matters of taste, and even less to do with the fact that Western values have been inherently oppressive to native people. Its emergence has to do with the need of human beings to narrate, to tell the story of their own lives [...].

Perhaps those of us who have been making the argument in recent years that individual works are comprehensible only within the context of the economic, behavioral, and political forces of the culture from which they emerge are simply pleading for cultural autonomy. It is a powerful argument and a poignant plea. Thoughtful American Indian critics do not see this argument as dangerous, hostile, or as a denial of history and art. In fact, they find it is the most liberating reflection of all. (1996: 77)

² In “Blood Trails,” an essay in his 1998 book *Mixedblood Messages*, Owens replied to Cook Lynn's 1996 essay “American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story” (*American Indian Quarterly* 20(1), 57-76.

What seems to puzzle and worry Cook-Lynn is the appropriation of Native literature (and criticism) by the literary and academic mainstream as something that can be reduced to culture and the oral tradition. Who is going to talk about treaties? And about legal cases as creative processes? The philosophical relativism that dominates Western intellectual environment may not be that appealing to minorities. In *Anti-Indianism in Modern America: A Voice from Tatekeya's Earth*, she says: "[I]t becomes a crime to revise a well-loved, scrupulously cleansed, and largely mindless history while the attempt to do better, to correct, to investigate is seen as inappropriate scholarship" (2001: 175).

Due to sheer lack of space, and not because they can be reduced to members of a single intellectual club (as Elvira Pulitano does with Warrior and Womack), I will review the work of "the three W's" of Native American literature, as Clara Sue Kidwell called Jace Weaver, Robert Warrior, and Craig Womack,³ dedicating one chapter to each of them. In *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (1997), Weaver, a theologian and legal scholar, advocates the inclusion of Native non-fiction in Native literary studies, making of religious studies the basis of his approach to Native literature, given "that there is a dimension other than the material one generally recognized as real" (1997: 32). In his study Weaver includes Christian writers William Apess (Pequot), Samson Occom (Mohegan), and Peter Jones (Ojibway), all of them Christian converts and ministers, examining their work in relation to their tribal commitments. A similar commitment to Native and broader communities, and the claim that Native literature both shapes and is shaped by community, led Weaver to coin the term "communitism," a neologism fusing "community" and "activism":

Communitism is related to Vizenor's "survivance," Warrior's "intellectual sovereignty," and Georges Sioui's "autohistory." Its coining, however, is necessary because none of these terms from Native intellectuals nor any word from the Latin root *communitas* carries the exact sense implied by this neologism. It is formed by a combination of the words "community" and "activism." Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community, including what I term the "wider community" of creation itself. (1997: xiii)

³Weaver et al. (2006), *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press) xv.

In his introduction, Weaver critiques dominant frameworks for reading Native literature, including the emphasis on a Native literary canon that excludes many understudied texts, and the problems of subsuming that canon within the canon of the United States. Weaver also includes in his study N. Scott Momaday's mother, Natachee, author of *The Owl in the Cedar Tree* (1965) and editor of one of the earliest anthologies of Native American Literature, *American Indian Authors* (1972), as well as playwright Lynn Riggs, a prolific Cherokee author prominent in the literary world of the 1930s and 1940s.

Robert Allen Warrior's *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (1995) is a comparative study of the works of Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) and John Joseph Mathews (Osage), where the author calls for a mature Native cultural and literary criticism. Warrior works as a historian interested in Native literature that has grounded "itself in its own history the way that African-American, feminist, and other oppositional discourses have" (1995: 2). The book includes an introductory chapter "1890-1916: Assimilationism and Apocalypticism," and three major chapters: "1925-1960: John Joseph Mathews and a Generation of Free Agents," "1960-1973: The Battle to Define Red Power," and "1973 to the Present: Diversity, Party Lines, and the Need for a Generational Perspective." Warrior describes his approach to history and literature like this: "The intellectual historical mode of chapter 1 served to create a context for understanding the place of Mathews and Deloria among American Indian writers in terms of the impact of history on their works." He then goes on saying that in the same chapter "the focus shifts to the ways in which literature promotes a deeper insight into history" (1995: 45). In Craig Womack's words, a distinguishing feature of *Tribal Secrets* "is that Warrior is the first Native critic to examine public policy as a central concern in relation to fiction" (2008: 60). Throughout the book, one finds references to the Dawes Act of 1887, the Indian reorganization Act of 1934, the Collier reforms of the 1930s, termination and relocation policies of the 1950s, as well as to relevant organisations in Native history. Warrior, like Weaver, has been accused of an isolationist and separatist stance, particularly by Arnold Krupat and Elvira Pulitano, who also question his concept of "intellectual sovereignty." It is true that there are some inconsistencies in Warrior's position, but it is also a fact that Warrior gives priority to communal rather than

personal identity, and that Indian communities are much more concerned with problems of land, jurisdiction, and sovereignty than with the story of the alienated protagonist that serves as model for much contemporary Native literary criticism.

Craig S. Womack opens his *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999) affirming that his purpose is to contribute “toward opening up a dialogue among Creek people, specifically, and Native people, more generally, regarding what constitutes meaningful literary efforts” (1999: 1). Like Warrior, Womack is not worried with postmodernism’s scepticism in relation to history, because, says he, it “is way too premature for Native scholars to deconstruct history when we haven’t yet constructed it” (1999: 1). Womack is particularly concerned with the recovery of the literary connections of Indian writers of the nineteenth century and the way their struggles provided foundational principles for an indigenous criticism. Womack also challenges current definitions of the American canon, making clear that his study is not an attempt to include Native literature in the canon or to open it up to a broader audience. He says that “tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures. We are the canon” (1999: 6-7). Womack goes even further, positing that “[w]ithout Native American literature, there is no American canon” (7). He sums up his critical agenda as follows:

I will concentrate on the idea that Native literary aesthetics must be politicized and that autonomy, self-determination, and sovereignty serve as useful literary concepts. Further, I wish to suggest that literature has something to add to the arena of Native political struggle [...]. I will seek a literary criticism that emphasizes Native resistance movements against colonialism, confronts racism, discusses sovereignty and Native nationalism, seeks connections between literature and liberation struggles, and, finally, roots literature in land and culture. (1999: 11)

No wonder that Womack has been the target of harsh and relentless criticism on the part of the partisans of cosmopolitanism and hybridity.

Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa/Anishinaabe) is one of the most prolific native critics and writers. Vizenor’s critical work is associated with poststructuralism, which has influenced a wide range of disciplines (feminist criticism, postcolonial theory, film theory, queer theory, for example). Poststructuralism breaks down conventional oppositions, challenging binary pairs such as writing/orality, nature/culture,

male/female, straight/gay, purity/contamination, civilization/savagery, and/or white/black. Vizenor's work provides tools that allow Native people to go beyond fixed, terminal definitions, giving them the power to (re)articulate identities as far as their imagination permits. "My pen was raised to terminal creeds" is a line from *Interior Landscapes* (1990: 235) that characterizes his project of deconstructing destructive stereotypes of Native Americans constructed not only by the Euramerican imagination but also by the Indians themselves.

Drawing from postmodernist and poststructuralist theories, Vizenor conceives of language as deception. In an interview to Elvira Pulitano partly reproduced in Pulitano's *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, he says:

Deception is one good, ironic theory on the origin of language; that is, the prompt and inspired, primary purpose of language was to deceive by directions and metaphors the listener, who was a stranger [...]. Why else would humans have a need to create a language? Similarly, and in the context of language theory, trickster stories are openly deceptive, but the difference, of course, is that everyone is aware of the pleasures of illusion, transformation, and deception in trickster stories. (2003: 148)

In *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (1994), Vizenor's central idea is that of the "invented Indian." The deconstruction of the "bone-choker Indians," the term he uses to describe the way well-known activists have posed as simulations of Indianness, begins on the cover of the book, which features an Andy Warhol silk-screen portrait of Russell Means labeled "This is not an Indian."⁴ Vizenor spells indian in lowercase and italicized, in a clear demonstration that the problem of identity is central to his thinking. He says: "You see, indians are simulations of the discoverable other, and only posers or the naïve dare stand with an ironic name [...]. The indian was simulated to be an absence, to be without a place" (Lee, 1999: 85). Vizenor's destruction of the views of the static indian is implacable. The final words of this essay are also the initial ones and came out of Vizenor's mouth:

About Indian identity I have a revolutionary fervor. The hardest part of it is I believe we're all invented as Indians [...]. So what I'm pursuing now in much of my writing is this idea of the invented Indian. The inventions have become disguises [...]. There is another idea I have worked in the stories, about terminal creeds [...]. It occurs, obviously, in written literature and totalitarian systems. It's a

⁴ Vizenor writes that Means is "one of the most esteemed postindian warriors of simulations in tribal stories and histories" (*Manifest Manners*, 19).

contradiction, again, to balance because it's out of balance if one is in the terminal condition. This occurs in invented Indians because we're invented and we're invented from traditional static standards [...]. Some upsetting is necessary. (*Bowers and Silet*, 1981: 45-47)

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