American Indian Literatures and American Literature: An Overview

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ADE Bulletin 75 (Summer 1983), pp. 33–38
ISSN: 0001-0898
CrossRef DOI: 10.1632/ade.75.33
MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE: PART I

The MLA Commission on the Future of the Profession recommended in its final report that departments regularly review their curricula. "in the light of women's studies, minority literatures, theories of composition, and emerging ideas in linguistics, philosophy, and other branches of critical reflection" (PMLA, 97[1982], 953). The Bulletin has invited the Commission on the Literatures and Languages of America to contribute a series of essays on multicultural literature as an aid to departments undertaking such a review. The first of this series is devoted to American Indian literature.
AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURES AND AMERICAN LITERATURE: AN OVERVIEW

From the beginning of our national history, the presence of the American Indian has been indelibly stamped on American writing as subject matter and image. From John Smith’s narratives on through Cooper’s romances to the heyday of Hollywood, we have had no lack of stylized Indian images to conjure with: noble savages and savage brutes, natural gentlemen and redskinned devils. Scholars like Roy Harvey Pearce, Richard Slotkin, and Robert Berkhofer have shown in detail how arbitrary, absolute, and self-perpetuating these images have tended to be—how mythic, in fact, being refractions of reality that have the power to alter reality and that reveal more about the image makers and their aggressive or guilty preoccupations than about Indians.1

But literary imaging of native life, of which there has been so much, must not be confused with literary assimilation of native imaginative traditions, of which there has been so little. The disparity between the persistent popularity of the former and the utter neglect of the latter is striking. Perhaps the strength of our writers’ fixation of images of the Indian largely accounts for their indifference to the existence of tribal literatures: why take the trouble to find out how native Americans picture themselves imaginatively when you and your readers already know their official Anglo literary iconography?

One might object, on behalf of a writer like Longfellow (who at least in undertaking Hiawatha interested himself in authentic native narratives) and others in the nineteenth century who cared even less than he did about Indian languages and oral traditions, that these materials were largely untranscribed and unpublished until the last decades of the century, when the U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology began to release its texts. Lack of conveniently available texts, however, is not enough to account for the kind of neglect we are considering, which seems deeply ingrained rather than simply a matter of scholarly work lagging behind literary interests. When the native linguistic and literary texts became available, our writers did not flock to study them: the literary interest was simply not there. The sad fact is that American literature has never really enjoyed that literary and philological zeal, essentially romantic, for rediscovering and assimilating folk art and aboriginal literatures that sent Goethe, Schiller, Herder, and others out to transcribe boatmen, farmers, and peasant grandmothers in the cause of extending and enriching German literature. Nor have there been many American writers who have expressed the kind of interest in the unwritten native traditional art of their land that Sir Philip Sidney admits to in that famous passage about the “blind crouder” in A Defense of Poies: “I have never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas that I found not my heart moved more than with a trumpet . . .” (ed. Lewis Sones [Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970], p. 29).

William Faulkner is one of our few writers who did hearken deeply to the rude song of the blind crouder, or rather to its American folk equivalent in the stories and oral traditions of the whites, blacks, and Indians of Mississippi. It is revealing of our biases, then, that instead of looking in Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee folklore for possible native sources of the Indian episodes in Go Down, Moses and other works, most of Faulkner’s critics have been content to accept the spirit of the author’s off-putting remark that he just “made them up.”2 So he did, of course, but of what? The question of authentic Indian oral or traditional influences in the great tragic story of the hunters and the bear is still open.

So, to sum up this brief and rather dismal survey, we cannot claim an Indian origin for American literature, if by that we mean—as we should—that it has drawn significantly and persistently on the native repertories themselves. Despite sympathetic writers like Faulkner and Thoreau and scholars like Lewis Henry Morgan, Adolf Bandelier, Daniel Brinton, Charles Leland, Washington Matthews, George B. Grinnell, Mary Austin, and Paul Radin, an attempt to trace American Indian sources would be a chapter in our history of literary missed chances until the middle of the twentieth century.

If it is too late for “origins,” however, it is never too late for “discoveries,” and I think that within the current trendiness of Indian studies there really are, at long last, the makings of a genuine American literary engagement with the first literatures of the country. To a considerable extent, imaginative writers, poets, and novelists are leading the way. Whereas in the last century poets like Philip Freneau, Thomas Cooper, and

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William Cullen Bryant were fond of writing sympathetic poems about native characters and situations, irrespective of ethnological distinctions, now we begin to have poets like Gary Snyder, who writes with an ethnographer's knowledge of western Indian folkways; David Wagoner, whose recent collection *Who Shall Be the Sun?* is based on scholarly transcriptions of northwest Indian myths; and W. S. Merwin, whose adaptations of Crow songs and of narratives and songs from other North and South American native peoples are linguistically and ethnologically scrupulous.

These interests and undertakings represent something new, at least for Anglo writers of such stature. Although there have been more American Indian writers in our history than most of us have realized, as important bibliographic and text recovery work by A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff, Dexter Fisher, and others is now revealing, there is also something new and auspicious about the rise to prominence over the last twenty years of so many gifted younger native writers. The novels and short stories of N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, Simon Ortiz, and James Welch; the plays of Hanay Geiogamah; the poetry of Silko, Ortiz, Duane Niatum, Ray Young Bear, and others; and the proliferation of anthologies of Indian writings all testify to the arrival of a genuine native American current in our contemporary writing, comparable to the breakthrough into publication and critical self-awareness of black writers a generation before. Furthermore, much of this new work—Silko's extraordinary first novel *Ceremony*, for example, and Niatum's last three volumes of poetry—is explicitly and self-consciously grounded in tribal mythology and in song.

How does this discovery of the traditional verbal arts of the tribes bear on the work of scholars and teachers in the field of American literature and, beyond that, on literary studies generally? First of all, the emergence of the creative work has been matched in the scholarly domain, not coincidentally, by the appearance of a new field of literary study: ethnopoetics. Deriving its methods and principles from cultural anthropology, literary formalism, structuralism, semiotics, and contemporary linguistics, the ethnopoetic movement has dramatically enlarged our grasp of oral or traditional literature as literature: the recent work of two distinguished scholars, Dennis Tedlock and Dell Hymes, promises new literary perceptions that will carry far beyond the native repertoires. Hymes's new book *In Vain I Tried to Tell You*: *Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) will be the benchmark in this field for years to come. To read this brilliant, difficult book is to see the western Chinookan narratives come alive under Hymes's scrutiny as sophisticated art—and also to feel an enlargement of one's sense of what literature is and what it does.

In a recent response to the working paper of the MLA Commission on the Future of the Profession, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has argued cogently that recognition and incorporation of new literary texts—black, Chicano, native American—must bring new methods, new ideas about literature, or else the widening of the canon is merely appropriation or, as we used to say, "token integration." In Gates's phrase: "Method arises from text; expand the notion of text, and critical method must change" (in *Profession 81* [New York: MLA, 1981], p. 6). A book like Hymes's certainly aims at expanding our notions of literary texts, and its critical methodology—especially its combinations of methods—will influence the study of more conventional forms of narrative.

In terms of academic politics, an MLA session or two on Indian writers and on traditional native materials does not constitute a new field or discipline, but it should count for something that for a number of years both the annual convention and the several western regional meetings have sponsored well-attended and lively sessions on such topics, often with native American writers participating. There are at least three professional societies besides the MLA: the Society for American Indian Studies and Research, the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, and the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures. Each of these publishes a journal or newsletter (see Bibliography, p. 48).

Periodicals of general literary interest—*Georgia Review*, *Western American Literature*, *New Literary History*, *Boundary 2*, and *PMLA*, to name a few—have recognized the growing interest in native American work by recently publishing articles on the subject. *American Literature* recently published Arnold Krupat's essay on transcribed Indian autobiographies ("The Indian Autobiography: Origins, Type, and Function," 53 [1981], 22-42)—a welcome new departure for this journal and a sign perhaps that *American Literature* and other Americanist journals will now actively help our field define and locate itself academically. Until we can see our subject as a special but legitimate zone of American literary studies, the field is in danger of eventually flying apart under the stress of excessive hyphenation: ethnopoetical-anthropological-folkloristic-sociolinguistical. . . .

If perceived within the academy as a branch of American literary scholarship, newfangled but devoted to our oldest literary traditions and deserving of serious graduate-level research and teaching, Indian studies could make up for lost time and get on better with its proper pursuits. Foremost among these is the kind of intensive work on native languages, tribe by tribe, that heretofore has been carried on almost exclusively for linguistic and anthropological ends; here, on a basic philological level, is where the major discoveries will be made, and in fact are already being made, by ethnopoetic scholars (see esp. "Discovering Oral Per-
formance and Measured Verse in American Indian Narrative,” in Hymes, pp. 309–41). Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to imagine a time when students identified with American literature will actually undertake to learn American Indian languages so as to study their oral literatures and, equally desirable, when native Americans will formally prepare to edit, interpret, and teach the repertories of their own cultures.

In addition to learning languages, we need to retranslate and reedit the older texts: those that appeared, for example, under the auspices of the Bureau of American Ethnology. And the possibilities of making new transcriptions from performances even at this late date should not be neglected, according to the recent work of Dennis Tedlock, Larry Evers, J. Barre Toelken, William Bright, and the team connected with the British Columbia Indian Language Project. Along with the collecting of new texts from performance, of course, we should make systematic efforts to collect native literary concepts and attitudes.

More generally, there is much to do in what might be called “literary ethnography”—that is, the detailed study of tribal and intertribal history and customs in relation to the traditional and modern literatures. What we need now is not so much new field work as a specifically linguistic and literary recovery of the enormous amount of neglected ethnological information collected and filed between 1880 and 1930. We take such cultural and historical illuminations of texts for granted in the study of Beowulf or Ben Jonson’s plays; the serious study of the native repertories will require a philological base no less detailed and meticulous. In Dell Hymes’s words, “With texts, as sometimes with the myths themselves, what is dead can be revived. We cannot bring texts to life by stepping over them five times, but we can by scholarship. There is much to do and few to do it.” (p. 14).

On more formal literary grounds, other challenges stand forth. One is to develop a systematic knowledge of the features—such as the characters, motifs, and plot configurations—of the native repertories, classified by tribe and region, so that typological “fields” and the primary story-telling permutations within them can be identified. Another pressing interpretive need is for comparative studies of Indian and other American literatures. The mysterious figure of the Trickster is prominent in both the Indian and western literatures—what about it? Such a question represents one area among others where conventional literary scholarship is capable, even if it is not based on the native languages, of making important contributions to the literary understanding of Indian texts. Conventional scholarship also has the opportunity and the obligation to help bring about the formal recognition in our schools of the native works.

In our more strictly critical endeavors, we speak con-

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fidently of the Indian literatures as “traditional” and “anonymous,” but as we begin to perceive them more clearly as literary art, the recognition of a personal element of artistry in some texts, expressing itself not in our authorial terms but rather in subtle transformations of traditional elements, becomes more and more possible. Dell Hymes has argued persuasively that the nineteenth-century Chinookan raconteur Charles Cultee was a bona fide literary artist in these terms, not just a terminal vehicle for Chinookan lore (“Folklore’s Nature and the Sun’s Myth,” Journal of American Folklore, 88 [1975], 345–69). Perhaps in such work, looking for the ghostly nuances and turns of individual artists within what Hymes has called “the imperturbable self-transmogrification of myth,” we stand to learn a great deal about myth, about our concepts of authorship, and about the origins of literature.

In a similar vein, we have almost everything to learn about the element of adaptation in American Indian texts—specifically, adaptation and incorporation of Anglo literary materials (and, for that matter, of black and Hispanic materials). One set of biases led many nineteenth-century writers to deny that Indians had any literary traditions worth mentioning at all, while another set has led to a sort of rigid “classicism” whereby most students of the native repertories have strictly avoided transcribing and studying narratives in which Caucasian influences are at work, for example, native incorporations of Bible stories and French folktales. Such “mixed” materials were and in many regions still are popular in Indian communities, and because of what they can reveal about the continuities of native values and imaginative forms, it is regrettable that so few texts have been collected and that the topic has been up to now virtually ignored.

This worksheet for the study of native literatures could go on indefinitely and will go on, I hope, elsewhere and in other hands—but I will conclude with one final desirable project, which would signal more clearly than anything else I can think of that the American literary establishment had actually accepted, belatedly, its intellectual and artistic obligations to America’s first literatures. This would be nothing less than a native counterpart to the monumental collaboration that has produced the Center for Editions of American Authors series (as, for example, the handsome editions of Thoreau and Emerson). Such a project would call for the systematic preparation and publication of a standard bilingual edition of the surviving native American traditional repertories, proceeding tribe by tribe, with full textual and annotative apparatus. A formidable project, and no doubt at present far beyond both our scholarly and our financial capabilities—but, given the poverty of our literary connections with the Indians historically, given our writers’ neglect of native literatures, given the continuing loss among the Indians
of stories and storytellers and the continued inaccessibility to them of sound texts—given all this, can we afford to propose to do less now?5

NOTES


2 Quoted in Lewis Dabney, The Indians of Yoknapatawpha (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1974), p. 11. Dabney is not far off the mark in asserting that Faulkner is “the one fiction writer of consequence since before the Civil War to make substantial use of the Indian subject” (p. 4), but he does not consider actual myth texts from Southern tribes such as the Cherokees.


4 See my essay “The Bible in Western Indian Mythology,” Journal of American Folklore, 90 (1977), 442–54. An expanded version of the essay will appear, along with others on the subject of literary adaptation, in my Reading the Fire: Essays in the Traditional Indian Literatures of the West (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, forthcoming).

5 An expanded version of this essay will appear in The New American Literary History, ed. Jerry Ward (forthcoming). The project is sponsored by the MLA Commission on the Literatures and Languages of America.
American Indian Literature is home to some of the world’s most colorful myths. Some examples of these are “The Sky Tree,” “The Earth Only,” and “Coyote Finishes His Work.” These myths all share a different storyline. With the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1990, Indian immigration to the US began to flourish (Pew 2012, 10). This Act was designed to place preferential treatment on Indian immigration. Indian immigration to the US began to flourish (Pew 2012, 10). This Act was designed to place preferential treatment on Indian immigration.