Native American Poetry in the Academy: Recognizing the Potential and Peril of Ethnic Studies Formations for Indigenous Cultures

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I say that tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree.

--Craig Womack, Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism

Abstract: Outside of tribal colleges and Native American Studies departments, cultural preservation and production becomes tactical, finding space in Ethnic Studies courses based on multiculturalist models. Misguided and/or under-funded teachers and administrators attempt to graft Native culture onto the corporatized University tree as some kind of minority branch. This tokenization bears no fruit conflating North American indigeneity with postcolonialism and melting pot pluralism. Successful curriculum enacts reciprocity: a good Native literature class does not simply add texts to the American canon; it historicizes and theorizes indigenous storytelling with endogenous methodologies and epistemologies. The potential for non-Native teachers to perform this work exists despite their difference. However, the deep contextualization necessary to this field gives these potential allies a very difficult job. Not only must they help students see beyond racist stereotypes and nationalistic ideologies, they must recognize their own limits, what they do not and cannot know. Applying theoretical insights on this topic from Paula Gunn Allen, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Scott Lyons, and Craig Womack, I analyze Creek and Pan-Indian mythologies in the poetry of Joy Harjo, focusing on her treatment of the Deer Woman spirit. I theorize and model a pedagogical approach to Native poetry for non-Native teachers.

If the U.S. university system can be understood through the metaphor of a capitalist but progressive, Western but pluralistic tree with departments for branches and research concentrations for leaves, then my paper inquires about the roots. I follow lines of inquiry by indigenous scholars like Paula Gunn Allen, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Scott Lyons, and Malea Powell into the political, rhetorical, and epistemological sovereignty of Native American Studies. I ask, in general, how can friends and allies in the boughs of academe read and teach indigenous literature without messing it up. This question is especially exigent for non-Native guys like me, who have working knowledge of traditional storytelling from community involvement and the library, but lack experience growing up within and carrying on American Indian culture. The positive response to this question entails at least two principles: pedagogical autobiography that explain exactly who is representing and contextual sensitivity that respects cultural boundaries. Allied teachers must speak under the right name and know well enough when to defer to elders. Specifically, I ask how Joy Harjo’s non-Native friends and allies can
read and teach her poetry without recapitulating the imperialism she writes so powerfully against. My answer on this question, as it is with the general one, is to emphasize Pan-Indian, regional, and other political identities and to be respectfully quiet on sacred stories that live in traditional contexts. Public universities gain wisdom and do good work studying Native poetry, but they should leave the "medicine" to traditional elders.

Craig Womack, another powerful Creek or Muscogee writer like Harjo, argues against white, liberal expropriations of indigenous culture in his monograph cited in the epigraph above. Expropriation is that word from property law for when a public agency takes land from a private owner regardless of his or her will. Womack critiques Western academics, who make Native stories objects of study without due regard to tribal literary traditions, breaking a very old hermeneutic rule to read culture in the context of its production. Though his call for tribal specificity in literary production and criticism draws limits on intertribal and multiracial alliances, it does not discourage them in the slightest. He acknowledges, "a number of realities that constitute Indian identity—rez, urban, full-blood, mixed-blood, language speakers, nonspeakers, gay, straight, and many other possibilities," and in each of the possible facets of indigenous identity a "number of legitimate approaches exist" (2). His argument is just one "point on this spectrum, not the spectrum itself." He makes an important point to caution critical approaches grounded in epistemologies and methodologies outside the tribal cultures with which they are working.

Endogenous ways of knowing and working with tribal literatures go way back past the Renaissance ushered in by N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. They can be traced back through the early colonial era when authors like Samson Occum and William Apess penned works in English, and back further to Mayan and Aztec codices written before European contact. In the last forty years, Native studies programs and tribally-controlled colleges and universities have built from this rich intellectual tradition, but not without discursive and institutional challenges. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's article in the *Wicazo Sa Review*, "Who Stole Native American Studies?" details the emergence of these programs and schools during the Civil Rights movement and Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." She traces the movement back to the First Convocation of American Indian Scholars at Princeton University in 1970, where scholars, artists, and historians met to discuss how to use education to preserve indigenous knowledge and protect the land.

The programs following this convocation advocated sovereignty through endogenous
studies instead of so-called "objective" or exogenous, modernist anthropological and ethnographic approaches. She defines these endogenous studies in two ways:

[they] emerge from within Native people's enclaves and geographies, languages and experiences, and [they] refute the exogenous seeking of truth through isolation (i.e., the "ivory tower") that has been the general principle of the disciplines most recently in charge of indigenous study, that is, history, anthropology, and related disciplines all captivated by the scientific method of objectivity. (11)

For Cook-Lynn, a militant voice in this conversation, these cultural workers should be American Indians, and their thinking should pertain to culture, place, philosophy, history, and law in "tribally specific and Pan-Indian modes." Unfortunately, what seems to have happened over the last forty years is that too many indigenous scholars became "token" minority voices in white schools.

She argues, "disciplinary strategies in Native American Studies were doomed, marginalized, dominated, and co-opted" because most folks ended up working in ethnic studies departments focused on inoculating forms of multiculturalism and inapplicable models of postcolonialism. Both of these focuses are important, but the former undermines sovereignty efforts,¹ and the latter falsely implies that colonialism in the U.S. is somehow finished. Unlike works of postcolonial literature, Native American stories are neither after nor finished with the oppression of colonial power. Indigenous literature speaks within and against a historical situation and discourse characterized institutional violence. Facing racist sports mascots, nationalistic history books, and bankrupt representations in popular culture, critical work starts in the resistant, de-colonial mode. Cook-Lynn criticizes the "neo-colonial" tokenization of Amerindian voices, and re-sounds the 1970s-era call for more learning environments like Navajo Community College and Sinte Gleska University, for more Native American Studies programs with departmental status.

Just as multiculturalist and postcolonial readings are potentially counter-productive, so are postmodern ones. Too many Western scholars have silenced Native voices through the

¹ See Scott Lyons' article in *College Composition and Communication* "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?" for a thorough definition of the kind of political and economic nation-building that needs to undergird meaningful academic study.
insidious use of the term "essentialism." The postmodern distrust of essences frustrates identity politics, for any utterance for a people must be underwritten by a collective ethos bonded in some way, by place, by blood, by tradition, by something real and lasting. To undermine through skepticism the historical and existential integrity of a place, a line of ancestry, a way of being may reveal the world's Blade Runner, but free-floating signifiers in the ocean of transnational capital is not a fertile space for human beings. The only thing that seems to thrive in this space is capital itself. Frederic Jameson-inspired critics like James Clifton, editor of The Invented Indian, from Cook-Lynn's and Womack's perspectives, are killing sovereignty efforts. In Red on Red, Womack relates the perspective of Abenaki, Algonquian poet Cheryl Savageau on extreme postmodernism:

I never even encountered the word "essentialist" before coming to grad school, and then it was thrown at me like a dirty word, mostly because I wrote something about Native writers and the land in a paper.

. . . the same professor who labeled me "essentialist," said there was no truth, no history, just lots of people's viewpoints. I argued that some things actually did happen. That some versions of history are not just a point of view, but actual distortions and lies.

. . . It's a big cop out as far as I'm concerned, a real political move by the mainstream to protect itself from the stories that Native people, African Americans, gay and lesbian folks . . . are telling. If everybody's story is all of a sudden equally true, then there is no guilt, no accountability, no need to change anything, no need for reparations, no arguments for sovereign status, and their positions of power are maintained.

. . . As I write this I can hear my grandmother saying, 'but smart and good aren't the same things.' (as qtd. in Womack 3-4)

Womack's response to this frustrating anecdote is to begin his study of Muscogee literature in particular, and Native textual production in general, with the assumption that "there is such a thing as a Native perspective and that seeking it out is a worthwhile endeavor." His intellectually un-fashionable idea is neither dismissive nor naive. He does not assume a "pure" Creek or Native consciousness in a New World marked by five centuries of colonial and neo-colonial violence. Instead he assumes that categories like authenticity and insider/outsider status have
real meaning in the historical realities Native Americans inhabit. Native perspectives do not constitute an under-theorized and monolithic thing from the pre-Columbian past. Though heterogeneous, they are real, and in diverse concert, sound voices different than the Western status quo.

The call for sovereignty meets friction on ethical lines when the work happens outside traditional contexts. Given the current formations of ethnic studies programs as multicultural and postcolonial branches on the corporatized university tree, much of this work will be non-traditional. In no way should this problem stop teachers and scholars from representing Amerindian voices. Native American literature should and can be taught and studied outside tribally-controlled schools, but many cultural facets that go along with these stories—forms of "medicine," sacred language, ceremonies, and customs—cannot simply be served up on a syllabus or recovered from a library archive. Joy Harjo puts this point succinctly in her interview with Triplopia in *Soul Talk, Song Language*:

> There’s still sort of that attitude, I think, with poetry, or even with anything Indian, where it’s there for the taking, and it just doesn’t really work that way. I keep remembering a quote from Luci Tapahonso, and she said it in Navajo, but I can’t remember the Navajo: ‘The sacred is on the tip of the tongue.’ The Disney American mind believes it can get something for nothing, that riches and fame are the end goal and describe success. But things don’t come free. There’s a payment for everything that you do. If you write something, something has to be offered in return. (14)

Reciprocity must be enacted. The canon needs to change at the roots when it expands and changes.

Theoretical language for the lame kind of inclusion to avoid comes from Chicana scholar Chela Sandoval. Her foundational work in U.S. Third World Feminism, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, explains supremacist rhetoric as a series of figures through which ethnic groups articulate and maintain power. Modern, WASPish institutions employ the "affirmative action"-type figure of inoculation so "difference can be recognized, taken in, tamed, and domesticated" (119,0). Transcending the supremacist inoculation of difference requires much more than simply building a "diversity unit" into Western-centric curriculum. Realizing the dynamic process of multicultural dialog implies deep changes methodologically and epistemologically. Courses and
essays that sound indigenous voices to critique nationalist and racist ideology offer something in return. Courses and essays that represent to motivate community involvement and work for social justice offer something in return. Departments that hire indigenous scholars offer something in return. Schools that provide funding and space for Native American studies departments definitely offer something in return.

Another way to understand this ethic of respect comes from Paula Gunn Allen's essay "Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony." Her discussion of how to share Pueblo spirituality with her predominantly white, university students is instructive. Since Silko's novel centers around indigenous healing and the main character Tayo's search for it during the postwar drought in New Mexico, teaching this novel must navigate an especially dangerous ethical path. Allen tends to focus on theme, symbol, structure and plot, because she can "no more do (or sanction) the kind of ceremonial investigation of Ceremony done by some researchers [circa 1990] than [she] could slit [her] mother's throat." (383). Investigating traditional contexts to understand indigenous ceremonies for purely academic reasons is, according to Allen, an obscene act that makes her "skin crawl." She confesses to be unable to finish reading these outsider-ethnography articles due to her intense and visceral reactions to them. And if that is not enough to instill caution and respect in potential allies, she relates another story about the folklorist Elsie Clews Parsons, famous for her early twentieth century work in the Southwest:

I was told that an anthropologist, Elsie Clews Parsons, had come to Laguna to collect material for her study of Pueblo religion and social culture. They had given her information readily enough and everything seemed fine. But when Parsons published the material, Lagunas saw how she treated their practices and beliefs, and they were horrified. In accordance with her academic training, she objectified, explained, detailed and analyzed their lives as though they were simply curios, artifacts, fetishes, and discussed the supernaturals as though they were objects of interest and patronization. Her underlying attitude for the supernaturals, the sacred, and the people who honored them didn't evade notice.

Academe cannot take the form of extractive colonialism, making yet more museum pieces of living culture. Realizing multicultural dialog is a dynamic process that changes both dyads, and
in order to function, institutions need to underwrite this work with adequate resources and epistemological respect.

So what does this discussion mean for non-Native teachers of English literature like me? Though Womack criticizes postmodernism for undermining tribal nation building, he does not argue that essentialist thought is sound either. I do not believe that it is sound, though the concept is woefully abused. I do not believe it is an abuse of postmodernism to argue that the body I inhabit does not exclude me from conversing with and representing to some respectful extent the culture of my neighbors. We inhabit the same neighborhood after all: Lincoln, Nebraska's Near South, where literally four blocks away from my apartment is the Ponca tribal office. I know, big deal, I live in a diverse neighborhood and as a graduate student in the humanities I get along in an economically marginal place. I know. Blah, blah, who cares? I barely care myself. However, this autobiographical turn is neither a mistake nor a disruption from the argument. Candid self-positioning is an essential component of the respect necessary for creating sound alliances. Very few critical works in ethnic studies avoid the pronoun "I." Objectivity here is a bankrupt concept. The identity of the speaker is always an issue, a point of explanation, a crucial facet of credibility. This rhetorical space needs many diverse voices, but we must enter it with honesty. "Wannabe's" and modernist anthropologists are not allowed.

However, who I am is a small part of this argument. My voice is the rustle of pages turning. The sources are more important, but I must say something, and in order to get started I speak along the lines of identity Joy Harjo describes during her interview with Triplopia:

> The individual is linked to family, is linked to clan . . . and is linked to larger groups like town, city, state, country, then earth, then planetary system. All are occurring at the same time and are part of the intimate structure of a human being. (24)

My middle name is Throckmorton, a Norwegian family emigrating to the U.S. in the late nineteenth century. My grandfather Peter is a brilliant chemist, whose favorite story is Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. My last name is Hertz, a Latvian family whose real name I do not know. The officials at Ellis Island shortened it to a German-sounding word for heart. My grandfather Marcus was a businessman, who translated Hebrew for me during Seder dinner. For him there was always this prayer: Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad.
Now, many of my U of Nebraska-Lincoln students, who know the rodeo circuit, wear camouflage jackets and cowboy boots, identify with this poem by Joy Harjo. "Deer Dancer" describes a mythic encounter in a real place, a dive bar with sawdust on the floor and neon signs in the window. Deer Woman walks into this "bar of misfits" and performs a striptease. She slips "down through dreamtime" to remind the "broken survivors" of their sacred ancestors and the faded, but lasting "promise of feast." Even poor Henry Jack, "who could not survive a sober day," has a vision from her visit. He mistakes her for Buffalo Calf Woman, but still, he sees her dance naked on the "table of names" and remembers home and how to pay his debts. Now, the Muscogee spirit alluded to here is erudite knowledge I cannot say much about, but there is enough North American content to make the poem worth sharing. Many survivors among the cultural ruins of jukeboxes and pool tables get this poem; they find connection through it. Harjo writes for us. She writes to help us see "the proverbial dream girl, the face of the moon" even in a "place like this." Even in a place like this.
Works Cited


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