The Multi-Missionary Eleanor Roosevelt of American Indian Literatures

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THE BIBLE-TOTING BIBLIOGRAPHY DISPENSE

Although I first met LaVonne Ruoff in 1977 at the Flagstaff NEH/ MLA Summer Seminar on American Indian Literatures, one of my strongest early memories of her is from 1982 at the Yale Institute on Reconstructing American Literature. She appeared as an expert on American Indian literatures backed by her bibliographies and a dog-eared copy of Jack W. Marken's *The American Indian: Language and Literature* (1978), which she held aloft and called "her bible." Less than ten years later anyone who was serious about promoting American Indian literatures was toting around a dog-eared copy of LaVonne's *American Indian Literatures* (1990). For these converts that book was their bible.

That bible, along with her co-edited *Redefining American Literary History* (1990), played a key role in transforming the American literary canon. American literary histories and encyclopedias have mentioned Native American authors at least since Samson Occom's entry in Evert A. and George L. Duyckinck's *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* (1855). But as I was compiling a Web site of tables of contents of American literature anthologies (www.uta.edu/english/roemer/ctt), I was surprised to discover that, despite all the Native American literary scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s, it really wasn't until the early 1990s (beginning with the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* [1990]) that American Indian literature entries appeared regularly in Early American, nineteenth-century, and twentieth-century sections.¹ LaVonne's bibliographic work had a significant impact on {102} the Heath (the Yale Institute was the communal beginning of that collection) and on other major anthologies.

Editorial boards of established anthologies move slowly. They need to be convinced that a "new" literature exists in sufficient quantity and quality before they assign precious space to it. LaVonne's work, with its Modern Language Association imprimatur, in combination with Momaday's Pulitzer, the attention paid to the native "renaissance" writers of the 1970s, and Erdrich's stunning arrival in the 1980s obviously convinced even the most established editorial boards, including the Norton Anthology of American Literature.

THE ON-STAGE MISSIONARY

If all LaVonne had written and edited were her bibliographies and *Redefining American Literary History*, she still would have deserved the Lifetime Scholarly Achievement Award (2002), a form of high recognition rarely bestowed by the MLA. After all, how many scholars can claim that their bibliographic work was one of, if not the primary driving force behind changing the American literary canon and the creation of a new field of literary study? But in my opinion her major achievement has been her commitment to moving on many public and hidden fronts to

help to bring about canon and academic disciplinary changes.

The most visible face of her multi-front crusade appears in scholarly book chapters and journal articles and in papers and lectures. The publications appear in the best general Americanist journals (e.g., *American Literature*, *American Quarterly*), the best ethnic studies journals (e.g., *MELUS*), and the best native studies journals (e.g., *SAIL*, *AIQ*, and *AICRJ*). She's delivered papers internationally and at prestigious national conferences but also in Illinois at Naperville North High School and Oak Park elementary schools.

Another quality of LaVonne's public multi-front effort is her persistent call to avoid premature closure of the American Indian literary canon. When writing about Momaday and Silko seemed to dominate academic discussions, she reminded critics of the significance of Welch and Vizenor. When written literature after 1968 was center {103} (and middle- and back-) stage, she stressed the importance of written literature from 1772 to 1968. When most scholars focused on modern male authors, she (re)discovered Callahan and championed Schoolcraft, Winnemucca, Johnson, and Zitkala-Ša. When 90 percent of classroom time and scholarly space examined fiction and poetry, she featured oral literatures, historical writing (e.g., Copway), and especially life narratives (e.g., Eastman and the University of Nebraska Press's American Indian Lives series, for which she is general editor). In other words, one of LaVonne's great missionary contributions is her ability to nag convincingly. Over and over we hear her saying, "That's fine, but don't overlook . . ."

THE BEHIND-THE-SCENES MISSIONARY

It may seem strange to end this brief appreciation by emphasizing LaVonne's least public persona, but her role as the Eleanor Roosevelt of Native American Literature is at least as important as her bibliographies, articles, and presentations. Why the Roosevelt comparison? Mrs. Roosevelt was once asked, "How can you stand to be on all those boring committees?" She responded, "If you want to save one baby, you become a good parent. If you want to save millions of babies you serve on lots and lots of boring committees."²

LaVonne has done an enormous amount of committee and administrative work to ensure that the infant American Indian studies discipline was saved and would thrive. At a crucial time she stepped in as interim director of the D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian History at the Newberry Library. She was president of ASAIL and the prime mover in gaining Discussion Group and Division status for American Indian Literatures in the MLA. LaVonne then continued to promote American Indian literatures as a member (twice) of the committee that at present is entitled the Committee on the Literatures of People of Color and now as a member of the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee and the MLA's most powerful committee, the Executive Council.

She has served on Indian community committees and has made major contributions to fostering the teaching of native literatures by {104} writing grants, directing NEH seminars for university faculty (including tribal college faculty), giving papers at NCTE conventions, and making presentations to potential teachers of American Indian literatures at universities, community colleges, high schools, elementary schools, and the Native American Educational Services in Chicago.³ She also helped to establish the American Indian Studies Consortium of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (which comprises the Big Ten plus the University of Chicago and her university, the University of Illinois at Chicago).

Even further behind the scenes she has been an official consultant, reviewer, and board

member on everything from learned journals like *American Literature* to children's literature programs to NEH grants. She has even volunteered to serve on doctoral dissertation committees of students at universities other than her own. For the past two decades the results of this beyond-the-call service have often been scholars who went on to impact the field, for example, Dexter Fisher, David Moore, Roberta Hill, and Ginny Carney.

Then there is the backstage missionary, the informal consultant, generous almost to a fault with her time and her advice -- which is always informed and often emphatic. (She emphatically called me to the carpet for omitting Simon Ortiz from the major authors section of a prospectus for the *Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* [2005]). We don't always have to agree with LaVonne (in the previous case I did and added Simon). But anyone who is about to embark on a major project in American Indian literatures would be wise to (or rather, would be a fool not to) consult with LaVonne. After all, she wrote one bible and is in the process of revising and expanding even that. Soon we'll have to retire our weathered copies of the first edition of *American Indian Literatures* and get ready to dog-ear another welcome missionary volume.

NOTES

1. There were other major anthologies that included more women and "ethnic" authors earlier than 1990, especially *The Harper American Literature* { 105 } (1987). But Heath was the first to include American Indian literatures throughout their volumes.
2. The source of this paraphrase of Mrs. Roosevelt's words is Abraham Maslow, as filmed in the educational movie *Maslow and Self Actualization*.
3. Another significant contribution to informing middle and high school students is her *Literatures of the American Indian* published by Chelsea House.

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