A Retro-Prospective on Audience, Oral Literatures, and Ignorance

Kenneth M. Roemer

I'll begin with archaeology and psychoanalysis. The week before I left for Flagstaff in 1977, I could dig through horizontal (on my desk) and vertical (on my bookshelves) layers of American Indian literary artifacts. Of course there were books by Momaday, Welch, Ortiz, and a brand new novel by Silko; there were general anthologies—the thickest being Thomas E. Sanders and Walter W. Peek's *Literature of the American Indian* (1973) and Frederick W. Turner's *Portable North American Indian Reader* (1973, 1974)—and specialized anthologies that already proclaimed Native texts as "masterworks" (John Bierhorst's *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature*, 1974) and already celebrated contemporary fiction and poetry (Ken Rosen's *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*, 1974, and *Voices of the Rainbow*, 1975). Jack Marken's bibliography *The American Indian* (1978) was not available yet, but we did have Anna Stensland's list for secondary schools, *Literature by and about the American Indian* (1973), and journals—*American Indian Quarterly* was into its third volume and SAIL was in its early stencil incarnation. And then there were stacks and stacks of ditto copies—the magic blue ink pages that allowed me to transfer poems and other short writings and translations from publications like the *South Dakota Review*, *Blue Cloud Quarterly*, *Greenfield Review*, *Quetzal*, and Bulletin of American Ethnology bulletins into my students' hands. As for my psyche—I certainly didn't feel totally isolated. In 1972 I was part of a small group (Randall Ackly, Larry Evers, Wayne Franklin, Per Seyersted, and Leslie Marmon Silko) at the MLA that started ASAIL. But MLA was just a few days a year. Back home in Texas, Native American Literature wasn't exactly considered mainstream. One of my colleagues wittily {18} announced that Indian literature was an oxymoron; another routinely called it "shit lit"; another enjoyed giving me playful Hollywood war whoops as I entered the elevator; a fourth proclaimed, in a department newsletter, that I must have graduated from "Bentnose U." Fortunately my chair was quarter Cherokee, and most of my colleagues were (bemusedly) supportive. Still, as I prepared to go to Flagstaff, I desperately longed to meet people who, like me, sensed the arrival of a truly remarkable literary revolution.

I found what I was looking for—a lively group, a mix of scholars and creative writers, Native and non-Native American, men and women from various parts of the country who were all excited about American Indian texts as *literature*. In *The Sacred Hoop* (1986) Paula Gunn Allen, one of the seminar staff members, argues that one of the most important functions of myth is to convince people that they are not isolated, that their concerns and joys are shared by others. By that standard the Flagstaff seminar was (if not a mythic experience) at least part of a very special story.

And a productive tale indeed. Twenty years later my archaeological desk and bookcase dig turns up numerous books and articles produced by the staff and the scholars attending. Of course there is the collection of essays we wrote (in very rough form) during the seminar, which eventually appeared as Paula's *Studies in American Indian Literature* (1983). There are Paula's other books, copies of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's journal *Wicazo Sa*, Larry Evers' classic study of
Yaqui deer songs, Dexter Fisher Cirilo's edition of Cogewea (1981), Andy Wiget's Twayne introduction, essay collection, and Dictionary (1984), now reborn as the Handbook of Native American Literature (1996), Gretchen Bataille's study of Indians in film and reference work on Native women, Gretchen Bataille and Kay Sands' critical study of women's autobiography, Michael Castro's book on poetic images of Indians, Jim Ruppert's recent study of mediation in fiction, Elaine Jahner's edition of Walker's Lakota Myth (1983), my own collection on Momaday and my just published Dictionary of Literary Biography volume on Native American writers, and, of course the "bible" of our field, A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff's American Indian Literatures (1990). (At the 1978 MLA Convention, LaVonne was carrying around a copy of Marken's bibliography calling it her scholarly "bible." Little did I know I was speaking to an incipient bible supplanter.) If we add to these works the many articles and books by other participants and staff, the books by the seminar's guest lecturers (for example, Ken Lincoln) and all the essays, poems, short stories, films, and novels by the creative writers (including Barney Bush, Joy Harjo, Harold Littlebird, Victor Masayesva, and Silko), then the tremendous impact of those associated with the seminar becomes abundantly clear.

Fortunately, this abundance has also decreased the dominance of the "Flagstaff Mafia," the term LaVonne Ruoff gave the group. By helping to establish the field, we made it easier for others to convince their colleagues that they were not indulging in a fad or professing "shit lit." Now there are so many fine young and not-so-young scholars in the field that I certainly have lost my sense of isolation. Indeed, I'm sometimes overwhelmed by the numbers of newcomers. I used to be able to walk into an MLA American Indian Literature session and immediately recognize 90% of listeners and 100% of the panelists. Now I'm lucky if I can identify 30% of the listeners, and I have had the disconcerting experience of not knowing anybody on a panel—and the even more frustrating experience of having a graduate or even undergraduate student ask me questions about a new novel by Louis Owens, which of course I haven't read. But these frustrations are more than compensated for by the realization that there are so many fine Native American writers today and so many important rediscoveries of written and oral texts and so many students and faculty discovering the field. Probably only LaVonne can keep up with "all these goings on."

Despite all the progress since 1977, three of the most important "lessons" that I learned at Flagstaff still need to be emphasized: the importance of audience, the value of studying oral literatures, and an awareness of the vastness of ignorance about Indians and Indian literatures. Leslie Silko taught me the first lesson. To say the least, I was excited about talking to her after her poetry reading. I had read her fiction, written about her poetry, even dreamed about her (that will remain part of the unwritten [adolescent fantasy] history of the seminar), and then during her reading, she mentioned that an article I had written contained a "wonderful" suggestion that convinced her to change a line in "In Cold Storm Light." (The change was no big deal: I argued for "then" over "THEN." But her compliment made me feel as if I had made a HUGE contribution to the progress of humankind.) I was ready to believe practically anything she might say about anything. What she did say was something very good about audience. We talked about Ceremony (1977), particularly its reception by Northeastern reviewers. This topic led to a more general discussion of audience. She said that if she thought that she had been writing primarily for people she knew at Laguna, Ceremony would have been about thirty pages long. All she would have to do would be to mention certain individual, family, and mythological names, certain places (natural, e.g., Mt. Taylor; and unnatural, e.g., the Dixie Bar), certain time periods and situations, and the readers would fill in the gaps with all the stories they had heard since
childhood. On the other hand, if she imagined a reader who knew little or nothing about the Southwest and American Indians, then almost every name, place, time, and situation would call for long explanations building to a thousand-page book. To avoid either extreme, she tried to imagine someone knowledgeable and sympathetic enough to identify with the human situations presented and to tolerate the withholding of some information.

The questions raised by this conversation and by Larry Evers' discussions about the importance of audience response in oral literatures inspired me to put together an MLA session on audience in 1981 featuring two Flagstaff alumni/nae (Larry Evers and Kay Sands) and two people we had discussed at the seminar (Dennis Tedlock and Momaday). We realized that the question of audience pointed us toward some of the most fundamental issues in the study of American Indian literatures. Certainly there is the issue of mediation—literary, cultural, ideological. I'm pleased to see that issue emphasized in books such as Arnold Krupat's *The Voice in the Margin* (1989), David Murray's *Forked Tongues* (1991), Louis Owens's *Other Destinies* (1992), Gerald Vizenor's *Manifest Manners* (1994), and Jim Ruppert's *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction* (1995), as well as in the numerous studies of as-told-to autobiography, including Bataille and Sands' *American Indian Women: Telling Their Lives* (1984). As Cook-Lynn and Jack Forbes have pointed out in provocative/controversial articles in *Wicazo Sa* (e.g., see especially the Fall 1987, Fall 1993, and Spring 1995 issues), discussions of mediation and audience raise basic questions about the role of American Indian authors and the functions of their literature. At one extreme is the notion that the "real" Indian author is an advocate of Indian causes who writes primarily for Indian readers and uses forms, such as newsletters and newspapers, frequently read in Indian Country. The other extreme defines the most important Native American authors as sophisticated polyvocalists who create powerful "contact zones," to borrow Mary Louise Pratt's term, that demonstrate a mastery of cosmopolitan Euro-American forms brilliantly appropriated as means of communicating traditional and local aesthetics and world views to large "general" audiences. Probably no two writers or scholars will (or should) ever fully agree on the degree to which the former concept should be labeled an overly restricted conflict zone and the latter as an overly generalized comfort zone. The important point is that the continuing dialogue about audience will help us to understand some of the most frustrating and most wonderful things about Native American literatures.

Discussion of audience also highlights one of the most troubling developments in Native American literary studies and pedagogy since the Flagstaff seminar: the tendency to focus (sometimes almost exclusively) on contemporary poetry and fiction written in English. An important qualification with a long introductory adverbial clause: because of the efforts of scholars studying nineteenth-century autobiography and because of the efforts of many scholars and anthology editors, notably LaVonne {21} Ruoff, Daniel Littlefield, Jim Parins, David Murray, Helen Jaskoski, Bernd Peyer, and Paula Gunn Allen, and many scholars working at the intersections of Native and Women's studies--there has been great progress in the rediscovery of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century works written in English. Another qualification: many general anthologies of American literature, notably the newest editions of the Norton and Heath, include translations of oral narratives and ceremonial literature. Still, if you've ever served on an editorial board (I've boarded on SAIL and *American Literature*), it doesn't take long to discover that for every article submitted on the Iroquois Rite of Condolence, or an Omaha naming tradition, or a Navajo creation narrative, there will be twenty or thirty on Erdrich, Silko, Momaday, Harjo, Ortiz, or the latest novel in the Oklahoma University Press fiction series.
The preference for contemporary fiction and poetry is certainly understandable. English professors are a conservative lot; they tend to teach what they've been taught. They are accustomed to teaching fiction and poetry, not ceremonial liturgies translated from languages that have more than 350,000 forms of the verb *to go* (as Navajo has). Besides, there is much excellent contemporary poetry and fiction that is quite accessible to and in demand by students. (My contemporary fiction course is supposedly limited to thirty. I could easily enroll twice that number and routinely raise the limit to the mid-forties.) Furthermore, the aesthetic and ethical challenges posed by teaching about oral literatures are truly formidable. One of the side comments that I remember most vividly from the Flagstaff seminar was spoken by Delilah Orr after Larry Evers' excellent presentation on Matthews' translation of the Navajo Nightway. She said that as a Navajo, she would have great difficulty teaching about such a powerful ceremony in a literature class. Of course, a conscientious teacher doesn't have to be Navajo to realize the many opportunities for mis-representation and even blasphemy when presenting texts that for many centuries have been sacred to a people.

Nonetheless, the avoidance of oral literatures is also not understandable on both intellectual and ethical grounds. Even if one's primary interest is contemporary writing, in order to understand more fully the presence of story and ceremonial traditions in the characters and personae created by Silko, Vizenor, Momaday, Erdrich, Walters, Ortiz, Endrezze and many others and the pain of the absence of those traditions in the creations of Welch, Dorris, Rose, Sarris, Owens, Hogan, Bell, and many others, it is important to know about relevant tribal and inter-tribal stories and ceremonies. But oral literatures deserve to be taught as much more than "influences" or "background," or even as authoritative sources of aesthetic and ethical paradigms that can be used as sophisticated models for interpreting contemporary texts. (In the 1995 issue of *The Journal of Contemporary Thought*, I've advanced the latter argument in relation to episodes involving women and violence.) Whether they are presented in live performances by storytellers and singers, in filmed performances, or in bi- or monolingual written texts, oral literatures pose the most complex and stimulating form of fundamental issues and questions about Native American literatures. It is obvious, for example, that the "collecting," translating, physical presentation, publishing agency, distribution and marketing approaches, and scholarly and general responses to texts as grand as the Navajo Nightway highlight in multitudes of ways the issues of mediation and audience. (See James Faris's *The Nightway* [1990] and the recent paperback reprint of Washington Matthews' *The Night Chant* [1995] published by the University of Utah Press.)

But even a "simple" episode from a Keresan Pueblo and Hopi Arrowboy story can speak profoundly about mediation and audience, especially when a century of published and filmed English versions are compared. In 1894 Charles F. Lummis used a commercial publisher (Century); book and story titles (*The Man Who Married the Moon*; "The Sobbing Pine"); categorical terminology on the dedication page ("Fairy Tale"); illustrations (often featuring children); and an introductory frame and a concluding explanation/moral to transform the narrative of Arrowboy and his witch wife into a family reading experience that could be performed by middle-class non-Indian parents for their children. In 1917 John Gunn became author, translator, and publisher of a fascinatingly ambivalent version of the Arrowboy episode. The physical appearance and titles of the book spoke--"Authentic Document." Instead of a line drawing featuring a generic Indian child, the frontispiece was a black-and-white photograph of Laguna Pueblo. Instead of moon marriages and sobbing pines for book and story titles, we have phonetic renditions of Keresan words (*Schat-chen*; "Yo-a-chi-moot and the Kun-ni-te-ya"). And
yet, Gunn felt compelled to distance himself (and simultaneously establish contact with his non-Indian readers) from the Arrowboy episode with an interpretive frame that labels the story as "superstition," "fanciful," "fantastical," and "purely imaginary." Erasing distance was one of the primary goals of Franz Boas's 1928 *Keresan Texts*. The publisher (The American Ethnographical Society), the dedication (to Elsie Clews Parsons), the careful indication of the year of collection and the storyteller, the literalness of the translation (which preserved opening and closing formulas, syntax, repetitions, and detailed directional information), and physical appearance of the pages (with vertical slashes indicating phrase groupings and the parenthetical line numbers) all spoke of pristine (or raw) data "objectively" presented and ready for comparative studies by social scientists. In stark contrast are four versions by two Native Americans. In *The Hopi Way* (1986) Mario Sevillano, the editor, includes an English translation of "Poowak Wuhti" (Witch Lady). The version was originally recorded in Hopi as told by a storyteller who wished to remain anonymous, and then translated orally, recorded, and transcribed into English. "Poowak Wuhti" has a strong conversational tone, as if the storyteller were addressing family and friends, which was the case in the original performance. The tiny excerpt from the Arrowboy story in Silko's *Ceremony* (247) functions as a mythological and interpretive preface to Tayo's impending moment of decision near the uranium mine as he watches his "friends" arrive in their pickup. Her narrative poem presentation of the entire episode in *Storyteller* (1981, 140-54) recreates the story in a familiar genre for modern readers while still preserving the oral origins of performance. By the time we read the poem, we have been introduced to Aunt Susie, Grandma A'mooh, and other relatives who told Silko many stories. These introductions and the conversational tone of the story are invitations for readers to imagine this "poem" as a family performance. Finally, Silko's unfinished film *Arrowboy and the Witches* (from her unfinished *Stolen Rain* series) dramatizes right before our eyes and ears a 1950s acting out of an immemorial story told by a grandmother surrounded by her family during the 1980s. Arrowboy's tale becomes a statement of adaptation and continuity of the whole storytelling tradition. Teachers who want to use Arrowboy to discuss basic issues of mediation and audience will have to resort to some photocopying (we'll never totally escape the need for updated technological manifestations of the ditto machine). But they can find plenty of interpretive advice from T. C. S. Langen's discussion of several versions of the story in the Summer 1989 issue of *SAIL* and Helen Jaskoski's detailed discussion of the Sevillano version in the 1990-1991 (no.2-3) issue of *Native American Literatures: Forum*.

The most important reason for studying, writing, and teaching about oral literatures goes beyond aesthetic and intellectual matters of mediation, audience, or other specific issues relating to the creation, functions, and reception of written and oral literatures. Oral literatures teach humility. (This message was modeled by the Flagstaff staff members, especially Larry Evers.) Non-Navajos may be able to appreciate the beauties of the translated images and cadences of Navajo chantways; acknowledge the generative power of words that can cure; marvel at the survival of ceremonies over the centuries. I doubt that many (any?) of them can honestly say that they "understand" them the way a traditional Navaho could. This observation might seem to be a banal truism, unless we consider that avoidance of complex oral literatures in favor of a concentration on well-known contemporary novels can lull some readers into a false comfort zone. As much as I admire books like *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and *Ceremony*, reading them could convince some readers that they fully understand, not only these books, but also what it means to be Kiowa or Laguna. I doubt that would happen to non-Indian readers of translations of Sayatasha's *Night Chant of the Zuni* or the *Nightway of the Navajo*. Simultaneously they can feel beauty and power, as well as humility and marginalization. That might not be a bad mix of
interpretive reactions to learn in the light of all great works of literature.

I've discussed the importance of audience and the necessity of studying oral literatures. Mention of the third major lesson that I took away from Flagstaff serves as my pessimistic-optimistic conclusion. Even though they knew we knew, all the staff members warned us to be prepared for vast ignorance about Indians and their literatures. (The two anecdotes I shared with several Flagstaff participants were my mother's experience at an Indian fund raiser in New York City--after her half-hour talk about her experience with Crow Creek and Lower Brule Sioux, a stylishly dressed woman asked, "And which part of India were you visiting?"--and a response to an MLA session paper on Momaday--"Why are you talking about Momaday as an Indian? Doesn't he have a Ph.D.?"

Despite all the post-Flagstaff awards that Native American authors have won, despite all the anthologies featuring Indian selections, despite all the courses and emphasis on multiculturalism, despite the grand elevation of our field to Division status in the MLA, the ignorance is still pervasive, evident even in supposedly enlightened venues. As recently as 1995 a Films for the Humanities & Sciences catalogue began its description of a new film on Momaday by identifying him as "[b]est known, of course, for Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee." A July 1994 survey of "The Soaring Market for Native American Books" in World & I identified only two authors of fiction--Frank Waters and Tony Hillerman. Maybe the seminar staff's emphasis on our crusade against ignorance explains why so many of the Flagstaff missionaries have devoted much of their scholarly efforts to basic introductions, bibliographies, and reference books. Why many have used NEH seminars and state funded projects to reach high school and college teachers. We know that for every devoted reader of SAIL and Wordcraft Circle's Moccasin Telegraph, there are 100,000 Americans whose closest contact to a Native American text is Dances with Wolves. I'm dismayed by the continuing ignorance, and delighted that the Flagstaff experience instilled in many of us the missionary commitment that impels us to keep after those 100,000s.