

Contemporary Native American Writing: An Overview

Two Waves of Native American Literature

The First Wave: Reconciling Identity

The First Wave begins in 1969 with the publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. This novel signals the entrance into a moment in American Literature in which Native American voices began to be received and recognized by the literary public. Soon after Momaday's publication and subsequent success, including receipt of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction that year, a number of American Indian writers emerged.

Native American novels serve to articulate a sense of self-determination for themselves. Narrative creation becomes a political testimony at time when reservation life remains beleaguered. The enactment of termination policy spurred a resistance movement that, at least momentarily, put Native Americans, and by extension their voices and desires, on to the forefront of the national political stage. In *Blood Struggle*, Wilkinson characterizes the disenfranchisement of American Indians after World War II as a time with "little hope" because the "reservations were dead-end streets economically."

At this same time that this social upheaval occurred, novelists began publishing texts in an effort to express the sentiments of the era. Kenneth Lincoln's coined "Native American Renaissance" discusses this First Wave of texts. Authors include James Welch, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday. Since then an evolution has taken place in the way Native American writers approach their subjects and the way these novels fit into the mainstream of American literature.

Both *Winter in the Blood* by James Welch and *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko serve as exemplars of the desire felt by native people to return to the old ways and to live lives of tribal sovereignty and the exploration and desire for discovery/recovery of identity, both individual and collective. The nameless narrator of Welch's novel "sifts through the debris of two cultures in conflict...Indian ruins scatter amid the wreckage of Western materialism." The narrator's struggles between reckoning the past memories of his loving father, and the present reality of his pragmatic, though distant mother.

Silko's protagonist, Tayo, struggles with his return home, suffering from battle fatigue (which we now call post-traumatic stress syndrome), a blossoming taste for alcohol and a disdain for the hypocrisy of the return of racism against Indians, temporarily suspended during World War II, but only because the nation was in need of soldiers. A sense of double consciousness is a point of contention during the First Wave of Native American literature, most specifically found in Silko's protagonist, Tayo.

Silko layers the traditions of storytelling with the issues of modernity. Tayo finds peace from the psychosis of war through the trope of a healing woman. The setting of this discovery occurring in the seclusion of the naturalistic landscape of the mountains signals Tayo's need to rebalance his mind from a war that is ransacked by artifice and modernity. After all, the catastrophic bomb that ends World War II belongs in the realm of the modern future not the ancient past.

The Second Wave: Ambivalent Enfranchisement

A Second Wave of Native American literature parallels the aftermath of the Indian Self Determination and Educational Assistance Act of 1975. The Second Wave is characterized by ambiguous racialized experiences, ambivalence toward the status of the identity, what it means to be a Native American, and the legacies, positive and negative, of the turbulent fight for enfranchisement of the previous decades. After the resurgence of Native American novels and short stories that often doubled as political statements, a new moment comes about in direct reaction to the one prior. This moment is a new period of Native American Literature in which civil rights and enfranchisement have been granted and, now, contemporary Indians seek to position themselves both in and outside reservation life. The Second Wave explores how to be an Indian in the increasingly connected life of an American in the twenty-first century.

Sherman Alexie's works best embody this new era of Native literary production. Sherman Alexie began his career in the early 1990s; however, his engagement with tribal history and reservation life began much earlier. Alexie openly discusses issues of poverty, alcoholism and hopelessness as blights to contemporary Native American life. These issues are addressed in his writing, but also in films like *Smoke Signals*, and also through a plethora of interviews and talks that Alexie has given.

Growing up in the aftermath of the protest movements of the 1960s and 70s, Alexie shifts the focus of Native American writing from return to tribal lands and identity to the interrelated tensions of realizing and maintain identity as both American and Indian concurrently. This shift signals the beginning of a new wave of Native American Literature.

Scholar Jeff Berglund, in *Sherman Alexie: A Collection of Critical Essays*, notes: "Tribal members, through the generations, evolve new traditions and ways of being in the world. Tradition is not static or opposed to innovation." Alexie's words create new traditions to evolve in his contemporary literary moment. Berglund also maintains that Alexie "has stated on more than one occasion that he's moved to explore certain subjects not just because they shed light on the experiences of American Indian people but because they lead to a deeper understand of aspects of himself or his thoughts." Alexie, in works such as *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, addresses the issues

of contemporary American Indian identity as more about relationships and juxtapositions, and less about distinct, separate American Indian culture. For Alexie, to be an Indian is to be an American.

For example, the primary struggle of Arnold Spirit, Jr., in *Absolutely True Diary* is to be himself, in whatever ways he can. Native American reformer, Charles Eastman touched on these issues almost a century before, being able to vacillate between the two worlds of white and Indian society with a level of comfortability; however, in his time Eastman was the exception, most certainly not the rule. Alexie works within this legacy in *Absolutely True Diary* in which the main character Arnold is working toward this balance, making peace with both sides by the conclusion of the novel. Gordy, Arnold's first friend at Reardan, states this clearly: "Life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being of the community."

This novel signifies the emergence of a new era of Native American Literature, no longer a renaissance but rather a revision. Native Americans are granted tribal autonomy. However, reservation life is not always ideal and tribal governance is not exempt from corruption and mismanagement. The Native American people have been left alone, but, as Alexie demonstrates in the character of Arnold's father, hopelessness and loneliness pervade the existential struggles of many tribal members. The struggle for autonomy and release from bureaucratic dismantling paved the way for the battle to avoid self-destruction. Life on the reservation, as Alexie illustrates, is littered with domestic abuse, alcoholism and depression. Life off the reservation, as illustrated in earlier novels like those of Welch and Silko, also leads to depression and disillusionment. Alexie dialogues with his predecessors in that life has changed, but different is not necessarily better.

Native American literature today is also not just being written in English. There is an American Indian literature in Spanish. Moreover, there is a small but growing body of Native American writing going on in various original Native American languages. There are well-organized efforts being made in many American Indian communities to strengthen or restore the place of such original Native languages as Seneca in New York State or Passamaquoddy in Maine, often through bilingual programs in the schools. Such bilingual presentation solves the problem of limited audience faced by the Native writer who might know her or his language well enough to write in it but who is faced by the dilemma of having no more than a few dozen or a few thousand readers able to read that tongue.