Chapter IV

Momaday and the Native American Renaissance: The American Indian Speaks

Storytelling is imaginative and creative in nature. It is an act by which man strives to realize his capacity for wonder, meaning and delight. It is also a process in which man invests and preserves himself in the context of ideas. Man tells stories in order to understand his experience, whatever it may be. The possibilities of storytelling are precisely those of understanding the human experience.¹

Native American writers are kindred spirits in their concern and reverence for land, using literature to create a consciousness about its sacredness, and maintaining harmony between man and land. Though they experience not a ‘renaissance’ but a thousand years’ continuum of literary tradition, a truism of canon formation states that unrecognized literatures need breakthrough events to gain attention and legitimacy. For Native American literature, the key event occurred in 1969 when N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. His breakthrough multicultural novel *House Made of Dawn* is an exciting foreshadowing of recognition for the rich and resilient oral tradition. This marks the emergence of powerful writers whose primary concern is to articulate the trials and tribulations of their people who are coming to terms with the transformation from a tribal and family-oriented community to alien social and religious systems. They firmly believe that it is these systems
which are responsible for the diffusion and sometimes complete breakdown of their cultures. Thus Native American writing exposes the tragic experiences of an ancient people.

In 1969 the Pulitzer committee for fiction awarded its annual prize to a young professor of English at Stanford University, the first to be acclaimed as Pulitzer laureate despite his Kiowa antecedents, and the fact that his novel dealt almost entirely with Native Americans. The Pulitzer committee’s announcement that this novel demonstrates “the arrival on the American literary scene of a matured, sophisticated literary artist from the original Americans” may have colonial undertones but the recognition does mark a seminal moment in Native American literary history. That young writer Momaday is the first Native American novelist to focus on the plight of the contemporary Native American, and to establish it as representing the cultural estrangement and social alienation characteristic of post-war American fiction. He served as a guide to the elements of the past, of legend and landscape, and of the present that have the power to restore their best selves, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. In an essay entitled All the Good Indians, Paula Gunn Allen recalls first reading Momaday’s novel, as a student at the University of Oregon:

I was the only Indian I knew. That was around 1967. Sometime in 1968, a package arrived in the mail from my
parents. It was a signed copy of N. Scott Momaday’s House Made of Dawn. I believed that book saved my life. 

The hopeful ending of the book enabled her to believe that she was not alone, that the world was not without Indians. The point she makes, albeit metaphorically, rightly sheds light on the novel’s place in history. In a 1985 overview of Native American literature, *Native American Fiction*, Andrew Wiget devotes little space to the period between Darcy McNickle’s 1936 novel *The Surrounded*, and Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* thirty-two years later. Instead he describes the social and political conditions of the Native Americans between 1940 and 1970. Charles Larson alludes to the same lacuna:

> There is a gap between American Indian fiction of the thirties and the sixties- more than one of years. The hiatus of the forties and the fifties represents a philosophical and symbolic break with earlier practices, a turn from assimilation to rejection.  

The writer whose work began what is called the Renaissance of American Indian literature was N. Scott Momaday.  

The same year, that is 1969, another writer, a Standing Rock Sioux attorney named Vine Deloria Jr., published *Custer Died for Your Sins*, with the subtitle *An American Manifesto* which analyzed current American attitudes towards Native American issues. Around the same time, John R. Milton edited a special Native American issue of the South
Dakota Review, which included the works of young writers of promise like Simon J. Ortiz, James Welch, Grey Cahoe, Norman H. Russell - all of whom had been up until then little published. The issue became so popular that Milton published it as an anthology entitled *The American Indian Speaks*.

Two other works that evoked interest in contemporary Native American writing was Peter Farb’s *Man’s Rise to Civilization* (1968) and Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970) - both books that stimulated interest in Native Americans from historical and anthropological viewpoints. Dee Brown’s book is one of the foremost works documenting eye-witness accounts and official records of the systematic subjugation of the Native American peoples during the latter half of the 19th century. Focusing on the 30 year span from 1860 to 1890, it offers a scathing indictment of the US government’s attempts to grab land by using threats, deception and murder, and to crush Native American beliefs and practices. The book chronicles the fate of the Dakota, Ute, Cheyenne and several other tribes in a series of events that many consider the most grievous atrocities in American history. Sitting Bull, the proud Lakota Sioux chief refused to submit to the US policies designed to strip his people of their identity, dignity and their sacred land—the gold-laden Black Hills of the Dakotas, as well as the Ghost Dance
which is a messianic movement that promises an end of suffering under the white man. But it was all but obliterated after the killing of Sitting Bull, and the massacre of men, women and children by the 7th Cavalry at Wounded Knee Creek on December 29, 1890.

But it was Momaday’s groundbreaking first novel that ushered in a Native American Renaissance leading to a flurry of literary activity that finds its own continuity in the works of Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna), James Welch (Blackfeet/Gros Ventre), Louis Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Chippewa), Linda Hogan (Chickasaw), Sherman Alexie (Spokane-Couer d’Alene), Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna-Sioux) to name a few notable ones. Hitherto, works by primarily white writers predictably serve up white triumph and Indian killing and disappearance as working pre-requisites. It is in this connection that Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, long-time editor of Wicazo Sa Review and the novelist of From the River’s Edge (1991), with its portrait of Sioux Community, berated Wallace Stegner in her 1996 work titled Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice, for his stance on the tribes’ ‘glorious demise’, his fantasy Indians, and his allegation that the Native West somehow ended with Wounded Knee:

I argue with Stegner’s reality. The culture I have known...exists in communities all over the region, in
language and myth, and in the memories of people who know who they are and where they come from.4

Native American literature is more than 30,000 years old and its roots are deep in the land - too deep for a mere five centuries of European influence to upturn in any lasting, complete and irrevocable way. According to Kenneth Lincoln in his book Native American Renaissance, the commonly accepted estimate is that there were once five hundred distinct Native cultures and as many languages in America. When Columbus landed in San Salvador in the Bahamas in 1492, there were about 4.4 million Native Americans. Today, they number about 2 million, consisting of eight or nine primary cultural groups; and of the three hundred and fifteen tribes, some thirty-eight percent live on tribal lands with the largest concentration of Navajos, Pueblos, Lakota and Apache, in California. Removed, dispossessed, transplanted, and relocated by federal fiat, with language and ceremonies gone, the Native people carry on their traditions while adapting to the tribal reality of the moment:

They worry about trading older Indian ways and values for short term benefits in a modern world. [p.185]

The central issue for them is to redefine their ‘Indianness’ in terms of the new and the old. However, ‘never more than a generation from extinction’, as Momaday says in The Man Made of Words, it is all the more to be cherished by the people because of this tenuous link. In
remembering, there is strength and continuance and renewal throughout the generations. For them it is important that they remember their histories through the art of story-telling. Geary Hobson reiterates in his introduction to the anthology *The Remembered Earth*, ‘Indians are everywhere, enduring, surviving, continuing.’ Kenneth Lincoln’s study serves as a critical focal point for he argues that despite ties to mainstream Western influences, genres, and themes, Grounded Indian literature is tribal: its fulcrum is a sense of relatedness.²

He suggests that the literature of this Renaissance is a written renewal of oral traditions translated into Western literary forms. Contemporary Indian literature is not so much new, then, as regenerate: transitional continuities emerging from the old.³

Momaday’s use of oral narrative, his re-telling of the old in new contexts and genres, in Western forms such as poetry, fiction and autobiography, all place him within the movement he is credited with initiating. And this is seen in the contemporary literature of Native Americans who are writing about themselves; their writings are based on firm ground, nurtured by strong roots, and are putting forth indomitable flowers.

When Hartwig Isernhagen asked Momaday as to how he accounts for the seminal importance of his novel, the latter’s response was:
I think, maybe, the answer to that is simply timing, that it appeared at a time when the world was ready for it, in 1968. I think of the publication of Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee [1970] about the same time, and those two books contributed to some kind of important change in the publishing world, for one thing. Suddenly the publishing world found that it had an audience it was not aware of. So House Made of Dawn was fortunate in being very early in what has been called “the Renaissance.” That meant a great deal...And moreover, you know, it was a story authentically set in an Indian community, the characters are Indian, and recognizably so. And all of that came together in a good way-so that’s the answer to that.7

In response to the same question, Gerald Vizenor declares that the publication of Momaday’s novel made an impact in three ways. First, Momaday has certainly given Native American writers ‘the contemporary voice that has a kind of courage to speak with complexity and diversity.’ In the context of it winning the Pulitzer, it ‘brought attention to what was thought to have been a non-existent literature.’ Lastly, it inspired critical studies of Native American fiction. In an interview with Joseph Bruchac in Survival This Way, James Welch remarks, “We no longer have to apologize for Indian writing” because by winning the Pulitzer Prize Momaday not only challenged the academic world to take notice of Native American issues and worldviews, but he was also “an encouragement to many young Indian writers.”

Momaday’s novel therefore, further laid the ground for the emergence of several new presses and magazines in addition to the
already established periodicals. These are listed as the South Dakota Review and Cimmaron Review, the Sun Tracks, out of the University of Arizona; Blue Cloud Quarterly of South Dakota; Indian Historian Press, with both a quarterly magazine and a monthly newspaper, Wassaja; Akwesasne Notes of upstate New York; Greenfield Review; Scree; Pembroke; Strawberry Press; and A Press—all have been instrumental in publishing most of the new and primarily young Native American writers such as Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, Simon Ortiz, William Oandasan and many others. These publications and their editors and publishers like Rupert Costo, Lawrence Evers, Joseph Bruchac, Maurice Kenny, Brother Benet Tvedten and John R. Milton, have offered a forum for these writers who share a deep sense of obligation to Native American people. These are voices that have emerged as a result of a ‘crash program of education’ to use Lynn M. Bayne’s words, initiated in 1954, after eighty-eight years of neglect by the federal government. The year 1970 then, became a landmark for the first generation of Native American college graduates.

Sidner Larson, a professor of English in the University of Oregon says:

American Indian writers such as Pulitzer Prize winner N. Scott Momaday have found their audience by blending a tribal world view with the Euro-American world view...The result is a Native American Renaissance that seeks to combine the best of mainstream culture with that of
American Indian cultures and may help with the pressing problems such as how to heal our damaged environment and slow the disintegration of our social fabric.\textsuperscript{8}

These new writers and poets fuse the traditional and modern to tell us who they are and what it is to be a Native American. A Native American is a quarter blood Indian tribal member, who may not speak his native language, or be raised on his ancestral land; he is a complexity of attitudes, choices, tribal endorsement, geography, gender, history and tradition. Only about a few hundred thousand Native Americans survive as full-bloods with one non-Native parent. To understand who they are, we must relinquish all inherited stereotypes such as the ‘red devils’ so triumphantly vanquished by the US Cavalry or John Wayne in the Westerns, ‘noble savage’, ‘vanishing Indian’ or ‘eco-messiah’, each of which offers a prejudiced portrayal.

At the point of convergence of various literary paradigms from a cross-section of the tribes, these writers have experienced the alienation, exile, and prejudice but have reached beyond such an experience to find greater inter-relatedness, one common to all tribes of the earth. These are a group of post-World War II artists who began to learn their own cultures in a revival of the quest. They retained, or even developed their sense of tribal connectedness, and the inter-relatedness within the \textit{Medicine Wheel} which is symbolic of the Native American Renaissance.
The wheel, or circle, is where the tribal Native American seems to find power. In *Seven Arrows*, (1972), Hyemeyohsts Storm gives an elaborate account of the concept of the *Medicine Wheel*, which helps one to seek understanding of one's self, and learn the many levels of perceiving, to achieve wholeness: if you and I were sitting in a circle of people on the prairie, and if someone placed an object in the centre of the circle, each of us would perceive that object differently.

The perception of any object, either tangible or abstract, is ultimately made a thousand times more complicated whenever it is viewed within the circle of an entire People as a whole. [p.4]

At the south of the wheel, the mouse represents innocence and trust; to the west is the bear, representing introspection; the buffalo at the north stands for wisdom, and the eagle to the east is illumination. However, we cannot understand our individual perspective until we are acquainted with many levels of perception. The Native American undertakes the perceiving or vision quest to seek his relationship with earth, air, water, fire, plants, animals, brothers, sisters, family, tribe and finally all the spirits of the universe. Native Americans regard tribe as family, not just bloodlines but extended family, clan, community, ceremonial exchanges with nature, and an animate regard for all creation as sensible and powerful. Tribe therefore means "an earth sense of self,
housed in an earth body, with regional ties in real things." One can draw a parallel here with the following prayer in Vairagyashataka of Bhartrahari Sanskrit, A.D. 7th Century:

"O Earth, my mother, Air (wind) my father, O Fire (light) my friend; Water, my kinsman, Space my brother, here I do bow before you with folded hands!"

The natural circle of the earth horizon, the sacred hoop, the sun, the moon, the rainbow and star - all of it is material for the Native American song-poet who

sings of kinship in the tribal circle...and rejoining the circle is the song that binds tribal America. [p.59]

However, the subject of their writing is not exclusive to Native American concerns but cover what the individual writer feels to be important. For instance, Momaday’s poem, Krasnopresnenskaya Station has a Russian feel to it. At the same time non-Indian writers should continue in the freedom of writing about Native Americans, but given the past three hundred years and more, of American literary history as well as Hollywood, considering the nauseating stereotypes of Indians as ‘red devils’ and ‘noble savages’, they must recognize that Native American people are now more aware of what is being said and written about them, and the old truisms, the satire and even the adulations will not hold up anymore. Looking back to nineteenth-century portraiture of Native life in
All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction (1990), Thomas King of mixed Cherokee and Greek stock, recognizes the romance, the beckoning power, of mythic Indianness, and at the same time calls for its end:

The literary stereotypes and clichés for which the period is famous have been, I think, a deterrent to many of us. Feathered warriors on Pinto ponies, laconic chiefs in full regalia, dusky, raven-haired maidens, demonic shamans with eagle-claw rattles and scalping knives are all picturesque and exciting images, but they are, more properly, servants of a non-Native imagination. Rather than try to unravel the complex relationship between the nineteenth-century Indian and the white mind, or to craft a new set of images that still reflects the time but avoids the flat, static depiction of the Native and the two-dimensional quality of the culture, most of us have consciously set our literature in the present, a period that is reasonably free of literary monoliths and which allows for greater latitude in the creation of characters and situations, and, more important, allows us the opportunity to create for ourselves and our respective cultures both a present and a future.10

James Welch, too objects to the sentimentally romanticized portrayal of Native Americans by white poets:

I have seen poems about Indians written by whites and they are either sentimental or outraged over the condition of the Indian. There are exceptions...but for the most part only an Indian knows who he is ...and hopefully he will have the toughness and fairness to present his material in a way that is not manufactured by conventional stance.11

That could well be corroborated by Lucy Evers’ (the narrator of Betty Louise Bell’s 1994 book, Faces in the Moon) riposte
"I am your worst nightmare: I am an Indian with a pen" which justifiably carries forward the resolve of Native American writers as to their own terms of literary imagining for Native identity.

For over half a century, Native American literature was primarily the productions of autobiography and biography and they constitute an important genre. Ignoring them would leave out not only a whole panorama of fairly recent history, but also an important link between the generations of people making the adjustment from oral tradition to the written word, standing as they were, at the crossroads of the 19th and 20th centuries. The most famous of this genre is John G. Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), a story told in Oglala Lakota by the renowned Chief to his son who then translated it to Neihardt, who reproduced it. Momaday comments on this transitional work which bridges the gap between the oral tradition and contemporary literature:

(it) has been and remains a standard introduction to American Indian oral tradition. An indispensable element here is the voice of Neihardt himself, who was a poet and could see clearly into the lyrical heart of Black Elk’s speech and preserve it in its true spirit.

Other than this “as-told-to” variety was the individual effort like Charles A. Eastman’s *Indian Boyhood* and his other works, and Momaday’s *The Names* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain* - delineating his family genealogy and sense of place- which continues to win admiration, for his
uniquely reflexive deployment of Western literary styles and of Native
oral legacy. He points out in *The Man Made of Words,*

> The Kiowa tales which are contained in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* constitute a kind of literary chronicle. In a sense they are the milestones of that old migration in which the Kiowas journeyed...they evoke the sense of search and discovery. *Many of the tales are very old, and they have not until now been set down in writing.* 14

The sustained imagining of the southwest’s geology, its time, its atmosphere and lineages, makes for autobiography simply luminous in the telling as Robert A. Lee has observed. And yet, *House Made of Dawn,* despite ushering in a Native American Renaissance, cannot help but bring into play paradox and vexation, for allowing the many Native-authored novels to go almost unrecognized. Is it then fair to say that there has been a circling back into these ancestries of Native word and story, and that the generation of James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich and even Gerald Vizenor are to be recognized as having emerged from a Native literary vacuum?

> Midway into James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood* (1974), his bemused and unnamed Montana Blackfeet narrator makes an observation:

> Again I felt that helplessness of being in a world of stalking white men. [p.120]

It carries the novel’s darkly laconic tone, the historic role-reversal of the hunter hunted. It may depict contemporary life but the effect is to imply a
larger, more collective dislocation, at once serious and yet often close to some comedy of errors. However, despite the characters’ drifting, drinking, absurd chance encounters, and each accusing shaft of memory, Welch’s story is not one of sentimentality. It points back into the sustenance of tribal legacy. To this end, Welch develops a first-person voice full of queries in which worlds clash yet, often overlap and even collude.

James Welch, of Blackfeet and Gros Ventre stock, started his literary career with a collection of poems, Riding the Earthboy Forty, in 1971. Earthboy was the name of a family from his reservation; the forty refers to the number of acres in their allotment of land. The poems are drawn from his Montana experiences, and reveal an influence of American Surrealists like James Wright and the Peruvian Cesar Vallejo. The Surrealists in the 1930s wrote poems that reproduced the ambience of dreams, but were composed by the same creative processes as traditional poetry. In these poems, as in dreams, objects undergo strange transformations, and normal, everyday causality is suspended, but the works are carefully disciplined products of the conscious imagination. In the works of Vallejo, Wright and Pablo Neruda, there is the passionate feeling, the bitter cynicism, the weary feeling of defeat, and the sense of anomie in an absurd universe. Welch shares the existentialism and
surrealism particularly of Vallejo who he learnt to appreciate through the translations of Wright. His existentialism is largely the result of the disillusionments of reservation life and a tribal and personal habit of laughing at the absurdity of existence.

Dreaming is a motif that runs through many of Welch’s surrealist poems. For instance, *Dreaming Winter* reads in part:

> Wobble me back to a tiger’s dream,  
> a dream of knives and bones too common  
> to be exposed....  
> Have mercy on me, Lord. Really. If I should die before I wake, take me to that place I just heard banging in my ears. Don’t ask me. Let me join the other kings, the ones who trade their knives for a sack of keys. Let me open any door, stand winter still and drown in a common dream.15

Meaning is elusive in such a poem, but it appears that Welch is contrasting the old Plains Indian way of life, hunting and warfare, with the uncertain world that the Natives now inhabit. The tiger is a predator who symbolically stands for the Native as a hunter and fighter, and the dream of knives is the memory of the old life. But that life is over, for better or worse, and so the hunter must trade his knife for the keys to the real world. Welch’s attitude toward this new world is ambiguous. The word ‘really’ in the last stanza indicates that the prayer may be more ironic than fervent. Whatever the tone, the ‘door’ which Welch mentions leads to life in the white world, and drowning in a common dream means
participating dubiously in American mainstream culture. 'Winter' refers not only to the fierce season that ravages Montana but also to the 'winter in the blood' that is the subject of his first novel written in 1974, a classic story of reservation life.

In the Montana that Welch depicts in his poems and novel, Native Americans drift in and out of white towns and bars, floundering in a meaningless universe, estranged from their traditional culture and the security and meaning it afforded them. History ended for them when their traditional way of life ended, and days that were once filled with meaning for them are now meaningless. History is over, and the gods are dead; events continue to transpire, but there is no pattern to existence, only dreams of the past.

From the narrator's reluctant return home past the borrow-pit, with its implication of earth lost or evacuated, to his mother, Teresa First Raise, and her new husband Lame Bull, a homecoming which he describes as:

Coming home to a mother and an old lady who was my grandmother. And the girl who was thought to be my wife. But she really didn't count. For that matter none of them counted; not one meant anything to me [p.2] through to the epiphanous recognition of the blind Yellow Calf as his true Blackfeet grandfather as against the 'half-breed Doagie' [p.159] and the
funny as well as serious burial of his grandmother, he might as well be
enmeshed in two landscapes. The one evokes literal Dodson, Montana, its
township bars and commerce, along with his mother’s Reservation valley
holding of hay, alfalfa and fishing country. The other bears ‘the presence
of ghosts’ [p.159], the line of family which includes the snowdrift
drunken death of First Raise, his father, who loses consciousness and lays
exposed to the elements, and of Mose, the fourteen-year-old brother, who
is run over and mangled by an automobile in a cattle round-up whom the
twelve-year-old narrator might have saved. Between the two, disjuncture
indeed holds sway:

I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon [p.2]

Afflicted with emotional frostbite, ‘winter in his blood’ after the death of
Mose, which renders him unable to feel compassion for anyone, he
resents his mother’s marriage to Lame Bull, a genial but somewhat
clownish adventurer who wants her for her prosperous farm. Welch
makes masterful use of ironic diction to undercut the dignity of his
characters:

Lame Bull had married 360 acres of hay land, all irrigated,
leveled, some of the best land in the valley, as well as a
2000-acre grazing lease [p.13]

Though he never felt any closeness toward her for she ‘never gave much,’
the narrator prefers staying with them to getting out on his own.
Much of the action of the book centers round his search for Agnes, a Cree girl. He ‘lies to his mother that he has married her’. He lives with her for a short while then disappears, abandoning and leaving her with his hostile family, who despises her because of her lineage. So she returns to the bar joints of Havre, and the narrator’s search takes him there.

These different terrains lead to confusions and charades which only slowly begin to clear. Agnes steals his gun, her brother beats him up, and she continues to haunt him. Nature itself can seem out of joint, ‘cockeyed’ as Yellow Calf calls it. Hence, meadowlarks sing in mock-chorus, pheasants gabble, magpies as tricksters argue, a hawk shot by him in childhood is remembered only because of its immobile tongue, his long-time horse ‘Bird’ which dies of over-exertion when he is pulled down by the mud in the slough while attempting to pull out a cow which was stuck- it echoes a previous experience, a sense of *deja vou*:

I had seen her before, the image of catastrophe, the same hateful eye, the long-curving horns, the wild-eyed spinster leading the cows down the hill into the valley. [p.166]

Welch’s skillful technique in the final scene, the grandmother’s funeral, gives a description as though he was investing a character with some dignity, and then pulls the rug out from under him suddenly:

I had to admit that Lame Bull looked pretty good. The buttons on his shiny green suit looked like they were made of wood. Although his crotch hung a little low, the pants
were the latest style....His fancy boots with the walking heels peeked out from beneath the new cuffs...Teresa wore a black coat, black high heels, and a black cupcake hat...Once again she was big and handsome- except for her legs. They appeared to be a little skinny, but it must have been the dress. [pp. 173-174]

Winter in the Blood is a comic novel but there is a good deal of pathos too, seen especially in the death of Mose. When the two brothers have rounded up the cattle and driven them from the range to the gate of their land, one recalcitrant cow, a “wild-eyed spinster” who has been leading the herd, balks at going through it. As she stands there, a calf breaks, and Bird instinctively gives chase. The hero is too small to control the horse and can only cling to the saddle horn. As this is happening a car flies past, hitting his brother’s horse and killing Mose. Although the narrator could not have seen the accident, he has a graphic picture of it in his mind:

I couldn’t have seen it- we were still moving in the opposite direction, the tears, the dark and wind in my eyes- the movie exploded whitely in my brain, and I saw the futile lurch of the car as the brake lights popped, the horse’s shoulder caving before the fender, the horse spinning so that its rear end smashed into the door, the smaller figure flying slowly over the top of the car to land with the hush of a stuffed doll. [p.142]

This is a climactic scene in which the narrator falls from Bird, injuring his leg. His brother dies and that leads his father to drink himself to death-
the only two people in the world he had ever loved, and so after the
accident he goes through life crippled emotionally and physically.

But the epiphany in which the protagonist recognizes his roots with
the sudden revelation of truth that is supposed to transform his way of
looking at the world, and the ending, Welch deliberately opts for a
combination of comedy and absurdity, by using scatology, an important
ingredient of comedy, to undermine the sentimentality. Nevertheless, the
“old lady who was my grandmother” becomes more real to him when
Yellow Calf, the man he discovers to be his grandfather, tells him the
story of how the Blackfeet cast her out to die during winter. The narrator
sees her as a young, beautiful, and vulnerable woman, whereas before he
had thought of her as bloodless and superannuated. In a flash of profound
insight he realizes that Yellow Calf is the hunter who had provided her
with food and kept her alive: that discovery first makes him laugh, but it
is a laughter that lacks humor:

It was the laughter of one who has been let in on the secret
through luck and circumstance...And the wave behind my
eyes broke. [p.158]

The narrator thus finds adulthood in a historic Blackfeet and Gros
Ventre continuity of name, family, tribe, land, and call to health as he
returns to the earth. He makes a promise to himself to have his leg fixed
and, in a typical touch of Welch irony, even marriage to Agnes. The signs
of disjuncture remain, as seen in the grandmother's funeral. But they do so also in relation to the signs of juncture, life over death. *Winter in the Blood* fuses the sense of carnival into seriousness, and portrays the narrator's life as Native *comedie humaine*, a juggling, yet at the same time holds the promise of order to be won from that same discordance.

The *Death of Jim Loney* too, has a victim-protagonist whose search for significance and meaning, moves in a downward graph into alcoholism, delusion, vision, and death - the process of alienation that offers little possibility of relief. The narrator in the first novel achieves some sort of sanity, but Jim Loney chooses to die like a warrior, out of choice, not out of defeat. Perhaps the most destructive aspect of alienation is the loss of power, of control over one's destiny, over one's memories and thoughts, relationships, past and future. In a world where no normative understandings apply, where one is perceived as futile and unwanted, where one's perceptions are denied by acquaintance and stranger alike, where pain is the single most familiar sensation, the loss of self is experienced continually and desperately. Native Americans, like the protagonists in these novels live in a land that is no longer their home, and they are, for the most part, powerless to do much more than determine the cause of their deaths.
In a 1986 interview with Kim Barnes, Leslie Marmon Silko gives her version of the place of story in Laguna community life and tradition:

The key to understanding storytellers and storytelling at Laguna Pueblo is to realize that you grow up not just being aware of narrative and making a story or seeing a story in what happens to you and what goes on all around you all the time, but just being appreciative and delighted in narrative exchanges.¹⁶

If this observation holds true for the telling-listening process of oral tradition, it can be said to have been adapted to modern Native autobiography. Her work, Storyteller could not be better thought an endeavour to shadow these spoken ‘narrative exchanges’, the text as representative, at once celebration and mural, story-cycle and a collage of text and image. In a 1991 essay, titled Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective, she says,

Where I come from, the words most highly valued are those spoken from the heart, unpremeditated and unrehearsed.¹⁷

A written speech or statement is suspect because the true feelings of the speaker remain hidden as one reads words that are detached from the occasion and the audience.

Silko, however, acknowledges her own paradox of writing oral heritage through the figure of her Aunt Susie, a Carlisle-educated teacher, and archivist of Laguna life and family:

This is the way Aunt Susie told the story.
She had certain phrases, certain distinctive words
She used in her telling.
I write when I still hear
Her voice as she tells the story. [p.7]

Oral-written, the speaking voice overheard as it were, makes a perfect
point of entry in this real-life history which weaves into poem-chronicle
or legend. And later, in The Storyteller’s Escape she adds:

With these stories of ours
We can escape almost anything
With these stories we will survive... [pp. 247-253]

Silko’s white Marmon lineage is given equal play alongside her Laguna-
Mexican ancestry. The Lagunas are a Keresan people whose culture is
similar to that of the Jemez Momaday writes about in House Made of
Dawn and The Names. Despite the mélange of Hopi, Zuni, Navajo,
Jemez, Acoma, and a few other tribes, the Laguna have a keen idea of
their discreet identity. Thus it is not surprising that Silko’s sensitivity
about living on the fringes of her mixed-blood antecedents has
contributed to her creativity, and she admits, “My poetry, my storytelling
rise out of this source.”

Storyteller has no shortage of allusion to all these tribes’ cultures as
also the Sioux and the Apache, and introducing a Laguna-Keres myth
regarding the Acoma place, Silko issues a reminder of how a story, is by
necessity a shared circle and consent:
The Laguna People
Always begin their stories
with 'humma-hah':
that means 'long ago'.
And the ones who are listening
Say 'aaaa-eh'. [p.38]

Yet she reserves her own margin to adapt, transform, collate, as an imaginative form requires in this weave of fact into fiction:

The story was the important thing and little changes here and there were really part of the story. [p.227]

Having been awarded the prestigious McArthur Fellowship in 1981 for her literary achievements, Silko's more famous novel, Ceremony, rewards what she, in a 1981 interview with Elaine Jahner, calls the ear for story and the eye for pattern.¹⁸

by inviting readers to explore ways in which the protagonist Tayo's story converges with the underlying mythic structure. Ceremony begins with a verse, or short poetic lines set into the conventional prose form that gives its rationale:

'Ts'its'tsi'nako,
Thought-Woman, the spider
named things and
as she named them
they appeared.

She is sitting in her room
Thinking of a story now.
I'm telling you the story
she is thinking [p.1]
Through the vehicle of the story, *Ts’its’tsi’nako’s* thought, Silko explains how witchcraft could be responsible for sickness in individuals, societies, and landscapes simultaneously, and ceremony is necessary to contravene its effects.

*Ceremony*, located in the Gallup arroyo, is the story of a mixed-blood Laguna named Tayo who, tortured by the desertion of his mother, the contempt of the aunt who raised him, and the trauma he experienced as a soldier in the Second World War, has acute mental illness which is linked to the Laguna reservation drought and the nearby Los Alamos atomic tests, that give the novel a contemporary setting. When he recovers, by the efforts of a Navajo medicine man named Betonie and a mysterious woman, Ts’eh Montano, the land begins to bloom again. Silko intersperses Laguna creation myths, witchcraft, vision quest and healing that give the work a timeless quality, and a sense that the action has happened before and will happen again. This has won the novel a central place in Native American fiction, leading her more famous compatriot Momaday to remark:

*Leslie Silko’s Ceremony* is an extraordinary novel, if indeed ‘novel’ is the right word. It is more precisely a telling, the celebration of a tradition and form that are older and more nearly universal than the novel as such.¹⁹
Momaday is referring to the Native American narratives but *Ceremony* incorporates in it an older form and tradition—that of the Grail romance though Silko was not aware of the medieval legend at the time.

The chief similarity between *Ceremony* and the Grail legend is that there is a link between Tayo’s condition and the drought that has devastated his land. Tayo could well play the role of the maimed Fisher King who, as he languishes, his land suffers and becomes a wasteland. When a knight—Gawain, Percival or Galahad—comes in search of the Holy Grail, believed to have been used by Christ in the Last Supper, he cures the King, and the land blooms again. Silko’s work is a Native American analog of the Grail legend. The ultimate cause of Tayo’s illness is the result of a centuries-old witchcraft, and Betonie’s ceremonial cure is completed by Tayo’s sacred quest. His illness is traced to his behaviour during the World War II, when he and his cousin Rocky were stationed on a nameless Pacific island fighting the Japanese. When Rocky is wounded, Tayo and a fellow soldier carry him on a litter through the drenching rain. Tayo fears the effect of the rain which is bothering Rocky’s wound and making the road slushy, so he prays for it to stop:

> When Tayo prayed on the long muddy road to the prison camp, it was dry air, dry as a hundred years squeezed out of yellow sand, air to dry out the oozing wounds of Rocky’s leg, to let the torn flesh and broken bones breathe, to clear the sweat that filled Rocky’s eyes...He wanted the words to
make a cloudless blue sky, pale with a summer sun pressing across wide and empty horizons. The words gathered within him and gave him strength...he could hear his own voice praying against the rain. [pp. 11-12]

What follows is the Laguna myth of the Reed Woman who spends all her time bathing while her sister Corn Woman works in the sun. Reproached by her sister, Reed Woman goes away to:

The original place
down below.
And there was no more rain then.
Everything dried up
all the plants
the corn
the beans
they all dried up
and started blowing away
in the wind.
The people and the animals
were thirsty.
They were starving. [pp. 13-14]

Whether this is an interpolation of Tayo’s prayer or that of myth is not clear but the narrative picks up:

So he had prayed the rain away, and for the sixth year it was dry, the grass turned yellow and it did not grow. Wherever he looked Tayo could see the consequences of his praying. [p.14]

Tayo’s guilt about Rocky’s death and the drought causes a nervous breakdown in him, what in medical terms can be called catatonic schizophrenia which could have been cured by Western medicine, but in a work of fiction, which shows that Natives are better off with their
traditional culture, he must find his salvation within a tribal context. A traditional ceremony is required to reintegrate Tayo’s self by re-impressing upon his fragmented psyche the whole mythic pattern of the culture hero and his quest, thus restoring the shape of his personal and communal history and re-establishing his identity. He thinks he is responsible for the drought because he had gone to war and might have killed someone there, and that somehow he is accountable for the death of his uncle Josiah too. He has the idea that if he had died instead of Rocky or Josiah, the land would receive rain. He retreats into a psychosis which he believes, renders him invisible, and which robs him of his ability to speak or be heard. The War provided only the catalytic shock necessary to galvanize the forces working to alienate him from his land, his family, tribe and tradition, even from his own flesh. More corrosive than the War had been his aunt’s Christianity, which

Separated people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul. [p.70]

All it took was the experience of total war, especially its final atomic destruction, to convince Tayo that for tribal elders the white world was ‘too alien to comprehend.’ [p.38] It almost destroyed Tayo, as it had others who returned, including Emo, Pinkie and Harley. He no longer had a usable past; his
Memories were tangled with the present...as he had tried to pull them apart and rewind them into their places, they snagged and tangled even more. [p.6]

Many of the characters in *Ceremony* suffer from the effects of alienation, which they experience in their perceived powerlessness to control their destinies, their isolation from the old ways and the attendant homogeneity, the growing meaninglessness of the traditions, and the lowered self-esteem that being a Native American in a white man's world too often creates.

On the other hand, Betonie, the Navajo shaman, who exemplifies the creative possibilities of mixed blood, accepts his heritage for the strength it gives him, and looks to basic causes for the situation the whole world is in. He is aware that alienation is a common sickness, not confined to the reservation or its urban extensions, and he identifies 'the witchery' as its source. Because he is comfortable with his integrated cultures and because ceremonialism has been his mainstay, he is able to heal Tayo and to help him find the mission he was meant to complete. His magic propels Tayo along his ceremonial journey which takes him to Ts’eh, the mountain spirit woman. Through her psychic powers during an intimate encounter, as in initiation rites, he gains the power to resist further witchery, whether his own or that visited on, and perpetuated by, the white world. At that point his land blooms again:
The valley was green, from the yellow sandstone mesas in the northwest to the black lava hills in the south. But it was not the green color of the jungles, suffocating and strangling the earth. The new growth covered the earth lightly, each blade of grass, each leaf and stem with space between as if planted by a thin summer wind. There were no dusty red winds spinning across the flats this year. [p.219]

After he has been transformed by these efforts, from isolated warrior to spiritually integrated person, after he has taken on the aspect of unity termed naiya (mother) in Laguna, he is able to understand the whole thing:

He would go back there now, where she had shown him the plant. He would gather the seeds for her and plant them with great care in places near sandy hills. The rainwater would seep down gently and the delicate membranes would not be crushed or broken before the emergence of tiny fingers, roots, and leaves pressing out in all directions. The plants would grow there like the story, strong and translucent as stars. [p.254]

While Ceremony is ostensibly a tale about a man, Tayo, Paula Gunn Allen observes its feminine landscape, and regards it as a tale of two forces: the feminine life force of the universe and the mechanistic death force of the witchcraft. And Ts’eh is the central character of the drama of this ancient battle as it is played out in contemporary times. Further laying emphasis on the Native reverence for land, she says:

We are the land, and the land is mother to us all. There is not a symbol in the tale that is not in some way connected with womanness, that does not in some way relate back to Ts’eh and through her to the universal feminine principle of
creation: Ts’its’tsi’nako, Thought Woman, Grandmother Spider, Old Spider Woman. All tales are born in the mind of Spider Woman, and all creation exists as a result of her naming.

We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea that permeates American Indian life; the land (Mother) and the people (mothers) are the same. As Luther Standing Bear has said of his Lakota people, “We are of the soil and the soil is of us.” The earth is the source and the being of the people, and we are equally the being of the earth. The land is not really a place, separate from ourselves, where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies; the witchery makes us believe that false idea. The earth is not a mere source of survival, distant from the creatures it nurtures and from the spirit that breathes in us, nor is it to be considered an inert resource on which we draw in order to keep our ideological self-functioning, whether we perceive that self in sociological or personal terms. We must not conceive of the earth as an ever-dead other that supplies us with a sense of ego identity by virtue of our contrast to its perceived non-being. Rather for American Indians like Betonie, the earth is being, as all creatures are also being: aware, palpable, intelligent, alive. Had Tayo known clearly what Standing Bear articulated—that “in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested,” that human beings “must be born and reborn to belong,” so that their bodies are “formed of the dust of their forefather’s bones”—he would not be ill. But if he had known consciously what he knew unconsciously, he would not have been a major agent of the counter-ceremony, and this tale would not have been told.20

Thus Tayo’s illness is a result of separation from the ancient unity of man, ceremony, and land, and his healing takes place when he recognizes this unity. The land is dry because the earth is suffering from the alienation of a part of herself; her children have been torn from her in their minds; their possession of unified awareness of and with her has
been destroyed, partially or totally; that destruction characterizes the lives of Tayo and his mother, Auntie and Rocky, Pinkie and Harley, and all those who are tricked into believing that the land is beyond and separate from themselves.

The healing of Tayo and the land results from the re-unification of land and person. He is healed when he understands, in magical and loving ways, that his being is within and outside him, that it includes his mystical mother Night Swan, part-Mexican flamenco dancer, prophetess, and herself an incarnation of Thought Woman who gives him the vision of the pathway to recovery. It also refers to Ts’eh, the ‘wonder’ being whom he had unconsciously loved from ‘time immemorial,’ and who had answered him with rain and Josiah, the spotted cattle, winter, hope, love, and the starry universe of Betonie’s ceremony. Through the stories, the ceremony, the gap between isolate human being and lonely landscape is closed.

When the story begins he is an empty space, a vapor, an outline:

For a long time he had been smoke...He inhabited a gray winter fog on a distant elk mountain where hunters are lost indefinitely and their own bones mark the boundaries. [pp. 14-15]

And he has no voice:
He can’t talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound, he tells the army psychiatrist. [p.15]

After Tayo completes the first steps of the ceremony, he is ready to enter into the central rituals of the cosmic ceremony which can simultaneously heal a wounded man, a stricken landscape, and a disorganized, discouraged society. He becomes a warrior in a peace-centered culture, dissociating himself from the people, totally negating his mundane self. At the beginning he does not understand the nature of death, or the fact that the departed souls are always within and part of the people on earth, and that they are still obligated to those living on earth and come back in the form of rain as a blessing. The people need a story that will take the entire situation into account, that will bless life with an integrity where spirit, creatures, and land can occupy a unified whole. In the end, the cure for him was a re-orientation of perception so that he could know that the true nature of being is magical and that the proper duty of the creatures, the land, and people is to live in harmony with what is. For Tayo, wholeness consists of sowing plants and nurturing them, caring for the cattle, and knowing that he belongs where he is, that he is and always has been home:

The transition was completed. In the west and in the south too, the clouds were round heavy bellies that had gathered for the dawn. It was not necessary, but it was right, even if
the sky had been cloudless the end was the same. The ear for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs; the feeling was theirs; we came out of this land and we are hers...They had always been loved. He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. He crossed the river at sunrise. [p.255]

Thus Tayo as the buzzard that purifies the land is able to take his place in the life of the Laguna; he has come home, and they can get on with the life of a village, which is what the land, the ceremony, the story and time immemorial are all about. Despite cultural differences, Tayo’s story becomes for us our ceremony of reading and in restoring some of our shared humanity it offers us a healing equal to his. Silko adds this myth:

Hummingbird and Fly thanked him
They took the tobacco to old Buzzard.
“Here it is. We finally got it but it sure wasn’t easy.”
“Okay.” Buzzard said
“Go back and tell them I’ll purify the town.”
And he did-[p.255]

In many respects, Momaday’s Abel, James Welch’s Jim Loney or his nameless narrator and Silko’s protagonist Tayo are alike. All have been psychologically affected by death, all are orphans except the narrator in Winter in the Blood, whose mother cannot communicate any maternal affection to her son, and none of these protagonists has a clear sense of belonging to a people, a tradition, or a culture. A tribal member’s estrangement from the web of tribal being and the conflict that arises are
common themes in the works of contemporary Native writers. The ancient thrust toward integration of the individual within the common whole is a movement fraught with pain, rage, and angst, beset by powerlessness, and *anomie*, and often characterized by political and personal violence. The contemporary Native American writer's preoccupation with alienation in its classic dimensions of isolation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, lowered self-esteem, and self-estrangement, accompanied by anxiety, hopelessness, and victimization, may be pervasive because the writers are themselves predominantly of mixed parentage. This consciousness makes them equally alien among traditional people and whites alike. As Paula Gunn Allen says,

> The Indian world informally classifies individuals according to their "Indianness."²¹

This imposes on such people the need to conform to the qualifying standards, often without knowing what these might be. Then too one can meet the formal standards and still find oneself excluded from the community on social levels; or one might change communities and be forced to re-establish one's Native identity, often with respect to unfamiliar norms. This is particularly true for those who come into a strange urban environment, conform to the standards of appearance,
speak one's own language or use English in the way that bilingual Natives of whatever tribal origins do.

The pervasive sense of uneasiness, of having been shut out or disenfranchised, of anger at circumstances that have resulted in overt or covert alienation from the basic source of one's consciousness, informs the greater body of Native American writing, though its expression is often disguised by historically justified anger and culturally supported romanticizing of the old ways. The subject of 'Indianness' generates an intense response because when belonging is a central value, those who are excluded are likely to feel the importance of that value, and are necessarily affected by separation. Thus we have the dimensions of alienation and the poetry and fiction that ensue from the position of the outsider- a position that is all the more painful when the perceived right to belong is greatest.

What is important here is that the world is seen in terms of antagonistic principles: good versus bad, Indian versus white, and tradition versus cultural borrowing. Personal significance is lost in a confusion of dualities. The personal war waged by those who choose to perceive themselves as thoroughly westernized is often worked out in bouts of suicidal depression, alcoholism, abandonment of Native ways, 'disappearance' into urban complexes, and verbalized distrust of and
contempt for 'longhairs'. John Big Bluff Tosamah in *House Made of Dawn* represents this response to the forces of alienation.

Those who cannot reject their race or culture, either because the winds of fashion and politics have convinced them or because they are aware that such an action is impossible, choose the course of self-rejection, working out their struggle through rage against others. A third category of victims of alienation are people caught between two cultures. These are suicidal, inarticulate, almost paralysed in their inability to direct their energies toward resolving what seems to them, an insoluble conflict. Their lives are beyond their control and any hope of reconciling the oppositions within and outside themselves seems beyond their reach.

For many writers and activists, unity with traditional tribal roots is sought in the humorless repudiation of the experiences that form a large part of their cultures. In the attempt to integrate a fragmented personality, many prefer a violent rejection of what they know and intensely cling to dreams of lost glory, lost traditions, and a fantasized past of plenty, justice, and rectitude. The better part of integration lies in a careful reclamation of facts that are relevant to one’s present circumstances. Many Native Americans do recognize the realities of their existence; the realization often produces a tragic vision because there is no way to be acceptably ‘Indian’ and acceptable to whites at the same time.
‘Tonguelessness’ is the prime symbol of powerlessness in the Native American world, and is a dimension of alienation that one finds in the works of Native poets and novelists from Momaday to Welch and Silko and many others as well. Abel, in House Made of Dawn is essentially an outsider in his own community even before he is drafted, but by the time he returns he has lost the power of speech. Estranged from his tribe as well as from himself, he lives his days remembering events that marked his strangeness and his isolation from all that should have been familiar to him. As a young boy, he is unable to perceive the geese as his brother Vidal does. He seems to be haunted by the deaths of his mother and brother that intensify the terrors of the unseen force that seems to stalk him; his grandfather, Francisco has made an uneasy peace with it, but carries the curse: his crippled leg, the deaths of all those he loved with the exception of Abel, whose crippling is less visible but more complete, indicate that he is a victim of some supernatural ill will.

This evil is echoed in Abel’s inability to participate in the ceremonial life of the village. He is isolated from the traditions that organize the seasons and human relationships into significant patterns. His participation in the Bahkyush eagle hunt is flawed by his inability to accept the pain of the bird’s captivity, resulting in his strangling it, thus violating the ceremony and separating himself further from it. He has no
norms, he cannot understand or structure what happens to him, and his response is a violent attempt to destroy what is destroying him. It his inability to articulate his powerlessness and isolation that results in him killing the albino, believing him to be a repository of evil, and therefore responsible for his pain. He misplaces his terror and humiliation at the hands of the white soldiers onto the strange being that resembles a white man:

One of the arms lay out from the body; it was there, in the pale angle of the white man’s death... [pp.78-79]

In his attempt to reconcile opposites that he cannot control Abel kills the albino and this leads to his own exile. The violence is a result of the collision of tradition and history. It is in contrast to Francisco’s acceptance of the unknown as

nothing more than a dull, intrinsic sadness, a vague desire to weep. [p.64]

and how he finds it possible to live out his life in relative tranquility.

There are several ‘mixed breeds’ in House Made of Dawn: Benally, the relocation Navajo who finds a middle ground between his economic need and his tradition, Tosamah, who attempts to connect his Native self and his white self by becoming both a Christian minister and a Peyote priest, and the lost men who attend his sessions. They all suffer
from some degree of alienation and attempt, through drink and *powwows* on the Los Angeles hills, to come to terms with it along with its attendant anguish.

Only Abel finds no way to bridge the wide gap between the self and the whites. Alcohol feeds his sullen, speechless rage which leads to a near-fatal beating by the corrupt policeman Martinez. When he returns home, broken and sick, to preside over his grandfather's death, he is still speechless; until of course he enters into the ceremonial life of the people and joins the 'runners', and while doing so, regains his voice. The running is symbolic of his spiritual health even if there is no indication that in reclaiming his traditional culture, he has rejected white culture. He sings a Navajo *chant*, appropriate in the light of his own mixed ancestry for there is no such thing as pure culture.

Silko's half-breed protagonist, Tayo suffers from the same powerlessness. He thinks he is invisible and therefore lacks the gift of speech. He feels responsible for the drought in his reservation because he had cursed the rain believing that if it stopped, his cousin Rocky would survive the War in which he might have killed somebody. Convinced that he is accountable for the tragic events surrounding him, he retreats into a dream life in which he is an invisible 'gray winter fog'. His suffering is caused by his half-breed status in a tribe which disapproves of mixed
blood people, and thus he was not taught Laguna traditions or its arcane knowledge. He saw his place in the family as the shadow of his more handsome and successful cousin; he believed he would at least take his uncle Josiah’s place in tending the cattle because Rocky was destined for college and a job in the white man’s world. With both dead, he retreats into a psychosis of invisibility, and is convinced he can neither speak nor be heard.

But it is Betonie the Navajo medicine man who restores Tayo because he himself is grounded in his ancient heritage even though his eclectic ‘medicine bundle’ includes western paraphernalia and techniques. But the particular curative artifacts are the four hoops, four bundles of weeds, and a white-corn sand painting that is similar to the Buddhist sand *mandala*. Tayo’s spiritual journey takes him to Ts’eh, the ‘mountain spirit woman,’ and through her love and assistance he finds Josiah’s cattle, and finally, his own wholeness. The solution Silko offers is the realization of the self through a ceremonial rite.

However, such a solution is not likely to occur for the average half-breed. Welch poses the same situation but resolves it in a realistic way even if the final resolution is a matter of personal integration through insight and action. In *Winter in the Blood*, the symptom of voicelessness is a quality of his nameless protagonist, but it is most characteristic of his
grandmother who is a permanent fixture in her chair and seldom says anything. The anonymity of the narrator shows the degree of his lack of power— a nameless Native is indeed powerless. This also reveals the extent of his estrangement from the self.

When the novel begins he is isolated from his family and tradition; even his history has been cut off by the exigencies of history and his grandmother’s past. As the novel progresses, he discovers his grandfather, a solitary man who converses with the weather and the animals, and through him, he recovers his family history. Other than these encounters with Yellow Calf and his mother Teresa, none have any meaning for him as he is adrift in his aimless life. In the end it is the recognition of his estrangement that leads him through this impasse and allows him to re-integrate his personality around realistic perceptions of himself and the reality he inhabits:

I wonder if Mose and First Raise were comfortable. They were the only ones I really loved, I thought, the only ones who were good to be with. [p.172]

Lying in the rain, unwilling to move, he finally confronts himself in a gentle encounter that enables him to understand that acceptance is the better part of grief.

We can see from the above accounts that none of these protagonists really felt a sense of belonging whether to a people, a tradition or a
culture. The conflict in each case is resolved in different ways: the southwestern authors, Momaday and Silko, choose traditional Native American modes, while the northern writer Welch prefers realism. This is attributed to the different perceptions the tribes in each region have; as the acculturation processes differ, so does the degree of alienation. Thus alienation becomes a political issue. In *House Made of Dawn*, police brutality accounts for Abel’s destruction, as is the lack of comprehension by liberal sympathizers like Father Olguin and Milly. Momaday’s portrayal of Abel as a lost case because he has been cut off from his sources of colonization focuses on alienation as a political theme. Silko’s political arguments also include the ideas and values of ecology, anti-racist, and anti-nuclear movements, and give her narrative a topical quality while advancing the plot and the themes of the novel. Welch’s tragic vision depicts the inevitable condition of Native Americans in the United States. His narrator achieves a sort of sanity, a balance between his anguish and his need, allowing him to make plans for a future that will not be as blighted as his past.

The traditional tribal concept of time is of timelessness, as the concept of space is of multi-dimensionality. In the ceremonial world that the tribes inhabit, time and space are mythic. There is plenty of time in the Native universe because everything moves in a dynamic equilibrium
and the fact of universal movement is taken into account in the ritual life of the tribe. Achronology is the device used by both Momaday and Silko. Events are structured in a way that emphasizes the motion inherent in the interplay of person and event. The protagonist wanders through a series of events that might have happened years before or that might not have happened to him personally, but that nevertheless have immediate bearing on the situation and his understanding of it.

The death of Francisco in Momaday's novel underscores the difference in perception of time between his people and Father Olguin who, unhappy at having been awakened at an ungodly hour, wants to know what time it is when Abel wakes him up to tell him his grandfather has died. Then aware that his response is inappropriate, he says, "I understand". But he does not. The novel revolves round the axis of time as motion. It opens with Abel running, and closes the same way. The epiphany occurs when Abel, brutally beaten on the beach, comprehends the significance of the 'runners-after-evil'. Momaday pursues his story, revolving all the while around the concept of Indian time, industrial time, pastoral time, ceremonial time, institutional time. In the end, the understanding Abel attains is the understanding gained by all who live in harmony and balance with the universe.
Ceremony is also organized mainly around motion and ritual. The role of the protagonist is to behave in an appropriate manner, and to this end he loses his mechanical sense of time; and his sense of identity is isolated in his movement within the mountain and within the ceremony he must enact. That his proper role is primarily one of motion is suggested by the amount of walking, riding, searching, and learning he undertakes in order to be a Pueblo man as the medicine man Ku’oosh explains to him,

But you know, grandson, this world is fragile. [p.36]

Native American time is a concept based on a sense of propriety on a ritual understanding of order and harmony. The right timing is that when the Native is in balance with the flow of the four rivers of life.

Two of Ceremony’s themes which Silko develops entirely out of Laguna/Keres perspective, for both are fundamental to the fabric of Keres pueblo life and thought, are the centrality of environmental integrity and the pacifism that is its necessary partner. These are also common motifs in Momaday’s work and indeed, in American literature in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Like Momaday, who was the first Native American novelist to take up the subject of ritual as witchcraft, Silko also uses it as a central theme, weaving these strands into the design laid down
in the clan story, which itself is the prose account or prescription for a ceremony.

Momaday explored the tribal mode of perceiving the conflict between good and evil as a complimentary dialogue and compared it both to the Christian belief that all pagan ritual is evil and is by nature opposed to the good and to the contemporary feeling that beliefs in ritual or witchcraft are primitive and have been culturally inculcated into members of a cultural system. Silko's book continues this exploration, positing a ceremony that will counter the 'witchery.' Like Momaday, she sees ritual as having dual faces, one evil and one good. But unlike Abel, Silko's protagonist is required to choose between good and bad, and the survival of his people rests on his decision. Abel is required to understand that all ritual is sacred and leads to the continuance of the tribe. Thus although the inter-textual link between House Made of Dawn and Ceremony has been much noted, Silko's achievement lies in realizing more fully than her contemporaries the possibilities of Native American myths and the storytelling frame, not just for ethnographic 'local color' or even for a context of allusion, but for providing the vital principle for plot construction and characterization. Also, Silko's novel is, and remains, emphatically her own, a narrative about ceremony yet, reflexively, itself that self-same ceremony.
Louise Erdrich’s *The Beet Queen* (1986) portrays a North Dakota Chippewa, Russell Kashpaw, as a Korean war veteran who is honoured by his state as its ‘most decorated hero’. He has been shot to pieces, has become an alcoholic, and needs a wheelchair after suffering a stroke. As the celebrants mill about, he sees himself as if in a Chippewa death vision:

This was the road that old-time Chippewas talked about, the four-day road, the road of death. He’d just started out. I’m dead now, he thought with calm wonder. At first he was sorry that it had happened in public, instead of some private place. Then he was glad, and he was so glad to see that he hadn’t lost his sense of humor even now. It struck him as so funny that the town he’d lived in and the members of the American Legion were solemnly saluting a dead Indian, that he started to shake with laughter. [p.300]

Erdrich deals with tribal history as a mix of defeat and victory, the ‘four-day road’ to indicate Chippewa cosmology. She tries to debunk the stereotype in ‘The only good Indian is a dead Indian’, and the irony which can envisage the transformation of Russell as maimed ‘dead’ Indian into an all-American ‘live’ patriot. His musings are laconic, tough, rueful, yet free of self-pity. In building this and the rest of the Chippewa world at the US-Canada border, Erdrich deals with lives, families and histories interwoven, one into the other, and yet, at the same time, full of missed connection like the history behind their making.
For Erdrich ‘Indian’ has never meant a cheerfully harmonious tribal community. If there is such a pattern to her fiction, one of the ‘revolving wheel’ then it is the wheel as often broken as not, full of odd spokes, shards, lives caught out by circumstance. Characters, mainly from Chippewa dynasties like the Kashpaws, Lamartines and Morriseys, touch, move on, inter-marry and feud, always persuasively human, yet as if the inhabitants of an only dimly perceived circle within America’s upper Midwest. If wheel and hoop are to be thought ‘Indian’, then the story, as it doubles back and forth on itself, almost turns that sense of circle inside out.

Told across a thirty-year span in first-person voices, the novel opens with Mary and Karl Adare, aged eleven and fourteen in 1932, who arrive illegally by boxcar in Argus, North Dakota, to claim kin with Fritzie and Pete, their aunt and uncle and owners of Kozka’s Meats. They were abandoned along with a baby brother, by their widowed mother, Adelaide, who had flown to Florida with the Great Omar, an aviator stuntman. It is a first of many separations in lives whose connection is their apparent disconnection. At Argus, the siblings themselves part ways; Karl is raised in a Catholic orphanage from where he takes to the road as a salesman yet to find some connection. Mary goes about her life in a shared disjunctive manner, a life at the circle’s rim. Their lives are
but two spokes in the wheel. This is a tale bordering on magic realism, and manages to capture the oddity of lives connected in discontinuity.

Gerald Vizenor, another important writer who has greatly contributed to the Native American canon, reconciles the opposing forces of good and evil in the manner of his Anishinaabe (Chippewa) people. He evokes the power of Manabozho or Wenebojo or Nanabush, the Trickster, who is the personification of the chaotic creative power that accompanies his main characters on their pilgrimage to find

nothing more than a place again. [p.206]

With this tribal and ritual device, Vizenor cuts through Christian-based dichotomies about good and evil, creative and destructive forces, and their analogues. Momaday describes him as

a brilliant and evasive trickster figure...He is the supreme ironist among American Indian writers of the twentieth century.22

Thus far the funniest and most brutal Native American novel Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles (1990) might readily recall aspects of Chaucer, Dante or Cervantes in its use of the *peregrinus* motif. The most important achievement of this novel is that it tries to distance Native American fiction from its colonizer-influenced frameworks by reflecting the facts of Native life more faithfully than its predecessors.
Like all trickster narratives, Vizenor’s post-modern novel, *Bearheart* is obscene and occasionally scatological, making the characters absurd and comical, because it is founded on the tribal perception of the essential humor of earthly life. Tricksters and clowns are common in Native cultures; the trickster is usually the principal culture hero of the tribe, but he is also an ambiguous figure who may create man, bring him fire, and rescue him from enemies, and can also be a menace and an amoral figure. In this work, Vizenor who, like Silko is keenly aware of being half-white and half-Chippewa tries to celebrate the unique status of the mixed-bloods to reverse the prejudice that has plagued them, and to make a hero of the half-breed. He slashes away at such prejudices and ‘terminal beliefs’ with merciless satire, exposing and ridiculing those who practice them. But *Bearheart* is also a serious and profoundly reverent book, and in joining these usually divergent impulses, Vizenor establishes the kind of chaotic equilibrium that the wilderness itself symbolizes.

Its thirteen pilgrims, each of whom reflects some aspect of Manabozho’s nature, are led by an old Anishinaabe shaman, Proude Cedarfair, the last of the Cedarfairs who refused to leave their ancestral home in northern Minnesota to go to the Red Cedar Reservation, the fictional name of the White Earth Reservation where Vizenor’s forebears lived. Along with his wife Rosina, and his ‘circus pilgrims’ [p.96], each a
mixed-blood whose number includes the seven clown crows, with Benito Saint Plumero or Bigfoot as the first to join them, and the mongrels Pure Gumption and Private Jones, they travel the abandoned interstate highways of America as though across a wasteland of a dark dream.

On their travels the pilgrims face and overcome a succession of perverted and murderous enemies, the first of whom is the Evil Gambler, Sir Cecil Staples, the ‘monarch of unleaded gasoline’, who wagers five gallons of gasoline against a bettor’s life in a strange game of chance, in which he always wins, then allows losers to choose their form of death. Vizenor seeks to hold together the legacy of America as Manifest Destiny, Native-trap, and gasoline and fast-food culture. Such encounters, as one pilgrim after another dies or abandons the journey, will lead into Bearheart’s (Proude) own final and transcending bear-entry into the Fourth World, which is the world of the native peoples much before the coming of Columbus, journeying backward into the ancient past of the earth. The novel ends with Rosina arriving at the pueblo and finding bear tracks in the snow. The frequency of violence and death, the extravagant sexuality, have aroused outraged puritanical complaints but once it is understood that the novel is shaped by Anishinaabe folklore and the post-modern tradition, the book is not so shocking after all.
In *Dead Voices: Natural Agonies in the New World* (1992), Vizenor is venturing into the realm of shaman vision with due invocation of the Anishinaabe earth-diver creation-figure of Manabozho, and of the wise woman Bagese transformed into bear voice, as figurative mirrors by which to explore Native meaning. But it is for voicing his opinion on the ‘Indian’ identity in a celebrated 1981 interview, and his auto-biographical essay, *Visions, Scares, and Stories*, in *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* (1995) that Vizenor is better known. Both give points of departure as A. Robert Lee observes. How to de-invent ‘the Indian,’ and to re-invent, in his signature phrase, *post-indian* identity? The idea is amplified throughout his fiction of Native trickster pretenses and transgression, the fusion of fantasy and realism in the tradition of the Rabelaisian carnival.

Betty Louise Bell’s *Faces in the Moon* (1994) has a female Cherokee narrator Lucy Evers, a divorced college teacher, who returns to Oklahoma just before her wayward mother dies. She summons the Evers lineage as through ‘women’s voices’ and from across a ‘kitchen table’ [p.4], a family in which she has grown up as ‘passed-around Indian child’ and as the grown woman who ‘every year (becomes) more Indian’ [p.33]. Her homecoming stirs ‘thick memory’ [p.33], a litany of anti-romance:
Dust, outlaws, pretty black-eyed women raising children alone, chopping their way through cotton, good ol’boys and no-good men. Full-blooded grandmothers, mixed-blood renegades and lost generations, whirling across the red earth in forty-nine Chevys, drunk on homemade beer, and aged by years of craving under the hot Oklahoma sun. [p.5]

The voices which speak to this memory alternate between witness and accusation, comfort and recrimination, each in turn, originating from Cherokee displacement and dispossession.

Gracie Evers, defiantly yet pathetically repeats her credo ‘Don’t mess with Indian women’, to be emulated by her sister ‘Naw, I sure wouldn’t wanna do that’. Drifting from man to man, Gracie’s world has been one of margins, loss more than gain. Lucy finds a complete voice of history in their Great Aunt Lizzie, who raised her, and who acts as a means for the young woman to go back in history to the 1835 Trail of Tears. Through this history she can imagine the first Dawes Act tribal enrolment interview of the Georgia-born Robert H. Evers, to visualize the impact of the Dust Bowl on tribal life, and to situate the Evers line in the larger history of Cherokee names and places.

Lucy writes the saga of hope and poverty in her family ancestry. Asked

‘What’s it like being an Indian?’[p.59]

her response shows an impatience with fictions and stereotype:
I wish I had Indian stories, crazy and romantic vignettes. Anything to make myself equal to their romance. Instead I can offer only a picture of Momma’s rented house, a tiny flat two-bedroom shack in a run-down part of town.

[p.59]

Years later while seeking out the Dawes Commission’s Cherokee Rolls, she uses her writer-memorialist’s voice with a supercilious librarian at the Oklahoma Historical Society:

I am your worst nightmare: I am an Indian with a pen. [p.192]

This summarises the cutting edge of Bell’s own novel and lays emphasis on the resolve of Native American writers to assert their own Native identity. By setting this trend Native American writers are moving towards establishing a distinct literary order.

Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Woman Who Owned The Shadows* (1993) emphasizes on women’s traditions which are the basis of tribal society. Women experience transformations in their life and their rituals are traditionally centered on continuance. In Keres perception the ‘supreme being’ is a figure referred to as *Grandmother Spider* or *Thought Woman*. She is the Dreamer, the ritual center, who sang her sister goddesses *Uretsetse* and *Naotsetse* into life and taught them the rituals they used to sing into being. Among the things they carried in their baskets were the heavens, the waters, the mountains, the earth, the *katsina*, the creatures and the plants. *Uretsetse* is also known as *Iya’zik*, the mother of all
creatures, and like her agricultural analogue the corn, she is the power of self-generation and regeneration which binds the people together and provides them with all they might need to live in harmony and reasonable plenty on earth.

Allen’s novel is concerned with the journey of the half-breed protagonist Ephanie Atencio towards psychic balance and describes how the parallels between her life and the lives of the god-women help her in finding that balance. She traces her experience in four directions: New Mexican colonial history, her inter-cultural family life, tribal tradition, and personal emotion and perception. She suffers a mental breakdown when her husband abandons her and their two children, and she moves from one place to another, amongst traditional societies and urban set-ups looking for salvation. Her search for psychic unity is founded in ritual awareness that is embedded within the adaptive and inclusive properties of the oral tradition as well as the rituals of her Guadalupe people. She learns to understand how her life and those of her mother and grandmother parallel the tribal narratives. As she understands these implications, she is able to accept her place within the ritual tradition of her people and her responsibility to continue it. Her difficulty, like that of Abel, Tayo, Jim Loney and Welch’s nameless protagonist, and Proude Cedarfair, is finding a point of entry into the ritual patterns of her people.
An important function of storytelling is to give people a basis of entry into the more obscure ritual tradition which will enable individuals to realize that the significance of their lives stems from connections with those who share a particular psycho-spiritual tradition. This makes the individual a part of the coherent and timeless whole, providing him/her with a means of personal empowerment thus giving shape and direction to his/her life. Leslie Marmon Silko reiterates that for the Native American,

the stories are always bringing us together, keeping this whole together, keeping this family together, keeping this clan together. 23

In the essay, *The Native Voice*, Momaday offers a slightly different view

As with all literary productions, so close in the foreground, it is difficult to draw critical conclusions. There is a considerable group of American Indian poets whose published work constitutes an important corpus in American literature. There are relatively few novelists. Perhaps the disparity is due to the fact that poetry bears a closer relationship to forms of oral tradition than does the novel. 24

Love and death are twin themes that encompass the whole of human experience. Thus they become the core of the poets' writings in the interplay of connection and disconnection which form the Native Americans' most significant understandings of their selves, their fellow creatures, their tradition, and their past.
Referring to Native American women poets, Paula Gunn Allen says that because the present is inextricably bound to their continuing awareness of imminent genocide, their approach to the themes of love and death takes on a pervasive sense of sorrow and anger that is not easily reconciled with the equally powerful tradition of celebrating with the past and affirming the future that is the essence of oral tradition.

The impact of genocide in the minds of Native American writers is so dominant that even the humor derives from its awareness as the Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan says in her poem *Blessing*:

Blessed

are the injured animals
for they live in his cages.
But who will heal my father,
tape his old legs for him?

Here’s the bird with the two broken wings
and her feathers are white as an angel
and she says goddamn stirring grains
in the kitchen. When the birds fly out
he leaves the cages open
and she kisses his brow for such
good works.

Work he says
all your life
and at the end
you don’t even own a piece of land…

Blessed
are those who listen
when no one is left to speak.\(^{25}\)
Practitioners of Native American poetry are few and listeners are fewer. The Native people, who form a tiny sub-population in the United States and who hardly buy modern poetry or literary novels, are busy trying to preserve the elements of culture and tribal identity while accommodating these elements in the larger American society around them. The non-Native audience has different assumptions, expectations, experiences and symbol structures. Hence there is a difficulty in locating readers or listeners who can comprehend the significance of the work. Humor, then, is a primary means of reconciling the tradition of continuance, bonding, and celebration with the stark facts of racial destruction, though the same is addressed with vigor, resilience and hope. It is hope that helps the people to endure, revived in spirit, and enabling them to recognize the bond between land and their life as a community.

Another poem *Neighbors* might serve as a prologue to her novel *Mean Spirit* (1990):

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In this country, men have weapons
they use against themselves
and others. It is the dying
watching death. Light a candle. 26
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This and *Oil* provide recurring images of the earth seeping ‘blood’ in a story that deals with a Osage dynasty dislocated by Oklahoma oil politics:
The earth is wounded
and bleeds.
Pray to Jesus…

The earth is wounded
and will not heal.²⁷

The land is lost and scarred by rigs and boreholes- the novel can be seen as a Native version of history written at the interstices of Oklahoma as ‘Indian Country’.

The metaphors that these poets use are those that fuse elements of tribal tradition with contemporary experience: thus the poetry of the Creek poet Joy Harjo finds itself laconically entwining ancient understandings of the moon, of personal relationships, of womanhood, and of journeying, with city streets, rodeo grounds, highways, airports, Indian bars, and powwows as the background. We get a glimpse of that in 3 AM:

3 AM
in the Albuquerque airport
trying to find a flight
to old oraibi, third mesa
TWA
is the only desk open
bright lines outline New York,
    Chicago
and the attendant doesn’t know
that third mesa
is a part of the center
of the world
and who are we
just two indians
A contemporary Native American is always faced with a dual perception of the world but he/she must reconcile them. The ideal metaphor will harmonize the contradictions and balance them so that internal equilibrium is maintained, each perspective becomes meaningful and that in their fusion, psychic unity rather than fragmentation is achieved.

Both Joy Harjo and Linda Hogan incorporate a spiritual vision in their poetry. However, the latter’s recent work is directed towards the politics of Native survival, which she, like all tribal activists, believes must include the survival of the natural world also. In an interview with Paula Gunn Allen, Hogan voices her deep, personal sense of the exact measure of global destruction we all face:

People used to think I was a very strange person, because when I was a child, I was speaking out for the animals, and I always will...But I also grew up with these visions of destruction. I feel that what people are doing from the beginning of the mining process all the way to the final explosion is that they’re taking a power out of the earth that belongs to the earth. They’re taking the heart and the soul of the earth. 29

One of the most complex of Native American women writers is Carol Lee Sanchez of Laguna-Sioux ancestry whose poetry is intellectually abstract and often jarring, with a combination of images, ideas, and insights from various sources that are far removed from
western categories. Her tone, posture, and point of view reveal a wry sense of humor with deep connections to Laguna thought and worldview. Perhaps she is not widely read because of her impatience with western stereotypes despite being raised in a multicultural, multi-linguistic, Roman Catholic environment. Her work avoids stereotypical images of Natives, it is mature and articulate. In spite of her cadences being closely attuned to Pueblo music and dance forms, her poetry can in no way be described as ‘primitive’. She accepts her own identity without any question and is committed to her obligation of maintaining a sense of traditional propriety. In an interview with Paula Gunn Allen she specified:

I want to unify (the book), to give it the sense of proper ritual...That’s what Indians have held on to. Even though they’ve gotten urbanized and acculturated, and even assimilated, they have held to those particular titles, or names of things that have become ceremony, that become ritual; that those directions, or whatever little fragment they’ve got to hang on to, it orders. It gives proper order. It also gives a connecting point to the spirit world. It is our bridge, our little rope bridge back into tradition. And that I think will be handed on. And the idea, I think, is for us in a transition period to place that tradition in the literary format so that it is comprehensible enough for Indians to grab it. Because genetically we respond to it.  

Sanchez’s poetry reflects this in that she writes with a view to connect with her people and with little or no concern about what white editors think about it. Her poetry combines technology and myth, politics
and motherhood, ritual balance and clear-sighted utterance, ironic comment and historical perspective in an attempt to keep that 'connection' viable in a modern context. In Conversations #2 she says,

They have disappeared me
as they have done to all
my ancestors before me.
Are you watching?....

This is Not a Pocahontas dress.
I do Not wear feathers
or a headband
or beaded moccasins
because my tribe does not wear those things...

I'm a left over Primitive
and you're supposed to feel sorry
for me because:
    I am poor and
diseased and
ignorant and
alcoholic and
suicidal...

We have Not been terminated
or exterminated.
We are here, all around you-
But- YOU disappear US
every day!

Are YOU watching?\textsuperscript{31}

And in Conversations # 4 she continues,
Father Europe:
I divorce you
from this tierra indigena
to me
this land filled with
tradition
long before your
displaced dropouts
began the rape and plunder
of what was already ordered.

Your genocidal tendencies
Have stripped ‘la gente indigena’
Of costumbre and ritual;
That crucifixion complex
Woven through this social fabric
Sent that proper ritual underground
Or dispersed it into
Fragments of cross breeds
To leave only splinters
To fester
In wonder of what
Can’t be remembered
That was forgotten or
Lost forever.

Father Europe:
I repel your future stake
in breaking my last connection
to my tierra-
this sacred altar
still holds the bones
of who I was.
those roots of me that
ache for knowledge of
who I might have been
before your Manifest Destiny
robbed my flesh
and diluted my blood.
I carry your cunning
in my veins-
your skill for mind-warp
and manipulation
along with my remembrance
of the old ones
who still vibrate
in me.
I am prepared to reclaim
my land.

I stand before you:
fully equipped.
I am a New Age
electronic Indian!
carefully bred and
tutored by you.

Father Europe:
I dispossess you!
take back my birthright
with the force of
my being.

This America
belongs to:

my people.32

Changes in custom and language, introduction of white education
and occupation have resulted in the breakup of ancient ways of life of the
Natives. Poets who address the stark fact of extinction no longer bemoan
the brutal fate but have moved forward to locate the means of negotiating
the perilous path between love and death, between bonding and
dissolution. By using the metaphor of transformation or metamorphosis
the oldest tribal ceremonial theme, they have attempted to build a bridge
between tribal consciousness and modern alienation. Paula Gunn Allen has written about assimilation and colonization, laying them against arcane and land-centered understandings, in a bid to balance between despairing reality and the hope that continued existence requires, as in the poem, *Transformations*:

> Out in the light or sitting alone,  
> sorting, straightening tangled skeins  
> (they’re always tying life in knots)  
> I would like to be sleeping. Not  
> dreaming, just blacked out:  
> no one bumping around in my brain-  
> no tangles, no deaths, just quiet  
> empty nests, just threads  
> lying straight and ordered and still.  
> Outside the window I can see  
> sweet winter birds  
> rise up from tall weeds  
> chattering. They fly  
> into sunrisen sky that holds them  
> in light.\(^{33}\)

However painful and futile their struggle becomes, the cycle of nature will make them understand that change does not only imply destruction; one must accept these for what they can signify and use them to lend vitality and form to life. She concludes, “Certainly in the long ago that’s what they did, and that’s what they can do now as well.”

She amplifies that Native Americans are resilient and their ways are durable. And while the dominant society has made it their business to assimilate the Native peoples into American life, tribal values,
perceptions, and understandings have endured to inspire the work of writers and artists as they continue to reach out to the Natives with this vital message. Highlighting the importance of the land, she says,

We are the land...the land is not really the place where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies...the land is not an image in our eyes but rather it is as truly an integral aspect of our being as we are of its being...Nor is this relationship one of mere “affinity”...It is not a matter of being ‘close to nature’. The relationship is more one of identity...The Earth is, in a very real sense, the same as ourself (or selves), and it is this primary point that is made in the fiction and poetry of the Native American writers of the Southwest.34

The centrality of the earth, unity and the eternal being of all things are also articulated in the poems of Simon Ortiz such as *Dry Root in a Wash*:

The sand is fine grit
and warm to the touch.
An old juniper root
lies by the cutbank of sand
it lingers, waiting
for the next month of rain.

I feel like saying,
It will rain, but you know
better than I these centuries
don’t mean much
for anyone to be waiting.

Upstream, towards the mountains,
the Shiwana work for rain.

They know we’re waiting.

Underneath the fine sand
it is cool
with crystalline moisture,
the forming rain.35
The ancient bond to the land and to the spirit world is in large part responsible for this tenacity, and the strength of a benign presence speaks powerfully in all the works of contemporary Native American writers:

There is a permanent wilderness in the blood of an Indian, a wilderness that will endure as long as grass grows, the wind blows, the rivers flow, and one Indian woman remains alive.36

Thus Momaday regards the Native voice in American literature as indispensable:

There is no true literary history of the United States without it, and yet it has not been clearly delineated in our scholarship...The subject is formidable; the body of songs, prayers, spells, charms, riddles, and stories in Native American oral tradition...has evolved over a very long and unrecorded period of time...it reflects a social and cultural diversity that is redoubtable...On the one hand, the native voice...has gone largely unheard; on the other hand, it is and always has been pervasive. Even those writers, among them some of the major figures in our literary history, who have known next to nothing about the American Indian oral tradition have consistently acknowledged that tradition and perpetuated it. That tradition is so deeply rooted in the landscape of the New World that it cannot be denied. And it is so distinguished an expression that we cannot afford to lose it...There is an interesting dichotomy here. We have side by side on our library shelves anthologies...from the oral tradition and books by contemporary American Indian poets and novelists. We must understand that the dichotomy is more apparent than real, that the one expression informs the other and that the voice is the same. The continuity is unbroken. It extends from prehistoric times to the present, and it is the very integrity of American literature.37
Notes and References


6 Kenneth Lincoln, Native American Renaissance.


8 Sidner Larson is an assistant professor and conference organizer of the UO Native American Literature Conference, Oregon Humanities Center, University of Oregon, where the nation’s best Native American scholars gather to bring their unique perspective to the discussions, and explore the Native American literary renaissance.

9 Vairagyashataka of Bhartrahari Sanskrit, A.D.7th Century.


19 N. Scott Momaday, Native Voice.


22 N. Scott Momaday, Native Voice.


24 N. Scott Momaday, Native Voice.


27 ________, reprinted in Geary Hobson, 1979, The Remembered Earth.


________, 1975, *Conversations from the Nightmare*.


N. Scott Momaday, *Native Voice*.