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## 1 | THE 1970s

The three authors discussed in this chapter—N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko—are prominent in contemporary Native American literatures. Certainly, during the last three decades of the twentieth century they garnered a great deal of critical attention. N. Scott Momaday is still the only Native author to have won the Pulitzer Prize, and the fact that he won it with his first novel is certainly remarkable and noteworthy. Moreover, this award helped open the door for publication by others, James Welch included, through the Harper and Row Native American series it helped initiate and the interest this in turn generated with other prominent presses. The first novels of these three authors are widely considered central to the canon, and many critical essays and books have been generated to discuss their merits since they were first published: Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1968; Welch's *Winter in the Blood* in 1974, followed by *The Death of Jim Loney* in 1979; and Silko's *Ceremony* in 1977. By 1984 and the publication of Louise Erdrich's first novel, *Love Medicine* (the "next generation"), and critical studies such as Kenneth Lincoln's *Native American Renaissance* the year before, these earlier novels had achieved the status of "classics" and become part of, as Lincoln's title suggests, a new wave of literary production.

Keeping in mind that the publication of Silko's novel came in the same year as the NEH conference in Flagstaff that launched the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures and all that subsequently happened to bring this canon into the curricula of universities and colleges, this would seem a fortuitous convergence of events. However, it is also notable that Silko was one of the participants at the conference, as was another woman writer from

Laguna Pueblo, Silko's home and the location of her first novel. Paula Gunn Allen's family has a long history at the pueblo, and one of her ancestors was a self-taught ethnologist; John M. Gunn published *Schat-chen: History and Narratives of the Queres Indians of Laguna and Acoma* in 1917.

After the conference Allen compiled a collection of works from other participants, and this became *Studies in American Indian Literature*, published in 1983. It was followed in 1986 by *The Sacred Hoop*, which extends the discussion of Native texts and cosmology originally presented in the former book. In other words, as the four novels noted above moved to define a critical center for the fiction canon, Allen and other scholars were attempting to articulate what made the canon distinct: what *differentiated* it from other canons.

In 1997, in preparation for a special issue of the association's journal, also entitled *Studies in American Indian Literatures (SAIL)*, dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the Flagstaff conference, I had the occasion to talk with Allen about the conference and those twenty years. The conversation took place at Château de la Brétesche in Brittany on June 25, immediately following the completion of a three-day symposium entitled "Theories of Representation in American Indian Literatures: European and North American Perspectives." The symposium brought together European and American scholars, both Native and non-Native, to share research topics and approaches, and the discussions that ensued were enjoyably intense and wide-ranging. Since much of the symposium brought historical contexts to bear in the discussion of Native texts, it seemed an appropriate moment to discuss the last twenty years with her.

John Purdy (JP): It's interesting, this morning, to be talking about the last twenty years, and that's one of the fun things about doing this issue of *SAIL*. It's been twenty years since Flagstaff, and as you were saying this morning, there's a lot that's happened in twenty years.

Paula Gunn Allen (PGA): Tremendous, so much . . . It's hard to know what the group . . . the first meetings were so funny. You'd go to MLA [the Modern Language Association's annual conference], and

there'd be this nice group of English professors or American lit professors, whatever. The first one I went to was, it must have been '73, Michael Dorris and myself and one other person, I forget who it was, and the people in the audience were asking, no, making these comments like, "Well, I know an Indian and he told me that the Indian way is blahda blahda blahda blahda." And then, by the time I went to the last MLA I went to, which was a couple of years ago in San Francisco, the level of the discussion is like the level here, at this symposium. It was just so far beyond what we could even dream of doing then. It's ah . . . I'm on the eve of retiring and I feel completely comfortable, in terms of my responsibility to the community, because my job has been to work in the literary field, and that's my contribution to our people, and I feel completely comfortable. It's not a problem. There's enough people out there doing enough variety of things, with really some solid approaches, that are useful to the Native people as well as to the literary community. So it's perfectly all right; I can quit, and others can do it as well.

I started doing criticism because nobody could read my work. Nobody could read Momaday's or anybody's, and so I started writing about it because there was no other way to get a readership. Quite selfishly for myself, although I never made any money from it. It was a bit disgusting that everybody else's [non-Native writers'] work was being studied . . .

JP: Well, that's kind of interesting, because if one thinks of all the works people refer to most often, many of them are yours. Not just fiction or poetry but the criticism. *The Sacred Hoop*, the early ones, *Studies in American Indian Literature*. Those are two prominent things that came perfectly spaced in these twenty years . . .

PGA: Actually, they are the first ones out of my [creative] work, and the novel came between *Studies* and *The Sacred Hoop*. But since I began as a poet and a novelist, and then I did these other things because they needed to be done—and I do enjoy it, I really enjoy it—I feel overshadowed, like I should have stayed with poetry, like Joy [Harjo] or Linda [Hogan] or Jim Welch or

so many others, and stayed as a creative artist, but then I tend to have a discursive mind as well as the other kind, so when I stop to think about it I realize, yeah, I couldn't have done that.

JP: Well, it's been an interesting time, a few decades of talking about the literature and then the different critical approaches that have come along, some of which have evolved, some of which haven't, over the past twenty years but also the books, the novels, the poetry, the drama itself. I mean, my god, it is truly phenomenal.

PGA: But there was nothing then, and now there's everything, like I said earlier. I can't even keep up with it all . . .

JP: None of us can . . .

PGA: For a while there I could do Native American Literature [a course]; it was so hurried to try to do it in one semester, particularly the contemporary literature, meaning from [William] Apess forward, but it could be done. There just wasn't that much in print. By 1982 I was at UCLA on a grant, and my idea was to do a comprehensive anthology of Native American women's poetry. After I counted two hundred American Indian women in print I gave up. I thought, It just can't be done. By then you couldn't do American Indian poetry and do it justice, there were just too many poets, let alone American Indian women's poetry. But in '77 you could have done it, and you could have at least given a wide representation of much of the poetry that was in print. Can you imagine that?! Since then it's very hard to deal with just one person's work. Isn't that wonderful? It's so exciting for me.

So then I went to fiction, the novel, and I specialized in that for quite a while, and finally short fiction started getting published. There was only a Richard Seaver book, *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* [edited by Kenneth Rosen], until the late '80s. And after [*Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*] came out I was amazed, it was received so well. I couldn't believe it. I just didn't think people read short story collections, never mind Native American women's short story collections. And that was reviewed in the *New York Times* and in the *Chronicle*, it was a "Pick of the Month" and of the year, and one thing and another,

and it was just delightful, because the works are so splendid. Oh my, it was a delight to be asked to edit. So now there are so many fiction anthologies that I can't even deal with them all either.

JP: That's what's amazing about these last twenty years, too, is certain points in that history where something like *Granddaughters* comes along and, it's so successful that it opens some doors, and then it's progressive because each work that's produced just demonstrates again and again the power of the works that are being produced . . .

PGA: Without Momaday and *House Made of Dawn* and the Pulitzer Prize none of us would be here, because it made people in publishing and the academy more willing to pay attention than they had ever been. Our big problem now is to get ourselves out of that minority literature "The Oppressed People Garden," which I find entirely irrelevant. It's not multicultural literature. I've taught Asian American literature, meaning Korean American, Chinese American, Japanese American, Vietnamese American, and I've taught Chicana American, Hispanic, Latina, and I've taught black American, Caribbean, et cetera. Our situation, the Native people's situation, is *quite* different. We don't belong in ethnic studies any more than English does, and English is, from my point of view as an Americanist, an ethnicity. And English literature should be studied in comparative literature. And American literature should be a discipline, certainly growing from England and France, Germany, Spain, Denmark, and the Native traditions, particularly because those helped form the American canon. Those are our backgrounds. And then we'd be doing it the way it ought to be done. And someday I hope that it will be.

But certainly we [Native writers] make no more sense [being studied] with African American literature than we make with "New World" American literatures. It's not sensible to put us into that category. Are we oppressed? Well, yes, we are, but no, we're not, because we still live on our own land, and we still live with our own gods, and we still live with our own ceremonies, and so people have moved, or were forcibly moved, but they

took themselves with themselves. That was actually common, like with the Sioux, who eventually emerged out on the plains as the Lakota. But they took themselves with themselves on that entire, long, that centuries-long journey. So it's not that they've lost that Native tradition; they just moved. And they have re-moved. I mean, if you look at the oral traditions, which is what we must look to if we are going to do accurate and responsible criticism, we can see that these things actually happened. We see that abduction narratives were a very important part of Native American traditions, if it was the Shoshonis or Laguna or whatever, we find these abduction narratives. And contemporary Native cultures don't have any slave narratives. What they did was they took the abduction narrative and shifted it to contemporary situations so that all that happens is that the oral tradition gets reframed, but it's the same story. It's just got a different setting. Different costumes, same story.

JP: That's interesting. One of the things people have been discussing in academics for at least twenty years, if not longer, . . . is, well, we get into the binaries again, don't we? Should there be a Native American literatures course, or should it be studied in the "American canon"?<sup>1</sup> So that has always been a debate, but to take a topical approach like "what we have carried with us" or abduction stories, and then we could look at various cultures . . .

PGA: And then you could do it without creating the dimensional problems we've been having, because it's not binary, it's not either/or, and the thing is, I would like to call the university a "multiversity." The university means there's only one god, there's only one way to do things, and to me that is directly counter to the American experience. That's fine for the English or the French or whoever, and in discussion they say they don't like that [to be grouped together], but then why do they do it to us? Why can't we have many literatures, all of which are American? African American literature is not African. It really isn't. It's American literature informed by the experiences here and African oral traditions, which were brought over from various African nations.

JP: Well, that makes a lot of sense. If we're ever going to be able to have a true discourse, we have to get rid of those simplistic determinations. The thing is, and it's always been kind of fascinating to me, that the geographical space we call the United States has always been multicultural. What has happened is there has been a construction and perpetuation of a myth of a unicultural experience.

PGA: Well, you know, I think it's Christian. You can only have one god, one holy and apostolic church. Okay, so imbedded in Western thought for two thousand years, or fifteen hundred years at least, is the idea of one king, one emperor, one people. But that's not true. And even the motto *E pluribus unum*, out of many one, but really what we have is out of many, many. And it's wonderful, 'cause that's the reality. Have you ever heard of one anything? You can't just have one leaf, you've got to have the whole tree.

JP: If you have only one thing, it dies off.

PGA: Gone. That's right. Everything has to be community, and it has to be multiple-community literature. That's what it has to be. There's no reason why we can't develop a contemporary Native American stance that enables us to generate political strategies that will apply. Not the same ones for everyone, but the appropriate ones for the case that you're examining. I don't see why, especially with computers and all. I think the issue is about status.

JP: Right back to what we were talking about earlier.

PGA: You have got to have "the right one," because once you have mastered "the right one" you can become the elite, and what worries them is they won't be the elite anymore, and then what would they do for meaning? Well, they might have to get a life, and we can't have that.

But just in terms of, well, from Flagstaff to now—that I can say these things, that I can even think these things is such an enormous leap. There're so many approaches, there're so many writers, there're so many critical studies, which I find all delightful.

JP: It is exciting, the way it should be.

PGA: Even when they're wrong, they dream up excellent ways of saying why and in what ways they succeed and in what ways they fail, which we couldn't do then. All we could do was stand there and say, "No, no, no," because we didn't know that kind of [critical] language and those kinds of critical strategies to work from.

We've come all this way, to a point where Mary Churchill can develop a *Cherokee* critical approach. It's just staggering. Like Henry Louis Gates did with *The Signifying Monkey*, and certainly for me that was a model of thinking, thinking. Look. He did it. He's got an Africanist model that is mediated by what they call "New World" experience.

So by the time you get to popular thought, yes, you have Esu-Elegbara, but you have something very unique, very American and that is peculiar to African experience in the United States as opposed to the Caribbean, as opposed to Brazil, I suppose, or wherever. But it's distinctly not just African. And you could take the critic as the man at the crossroads, the one who interprets what the gods said to the speaker, the writer, the poet, duh dah duh da duh da (the expression). You have the code—I can't remember their name for the code [alphabet of Mawu?—but there's an actual code, and the critic is the one who knows the code, and she decodes it. Just as the case in the Esu-Elegbara figure decodes what's coming through the channel, the transmedium. So you begin to see that the critic fits into a tradition that's entirely whole. It's not about appropriating, it's about interpreting.

JP: As long as the critic doesn't keep the code [secret].

PGA: Well, that's the thing. You have to know the code well, and then you can share it. Instead, if you don't know it well, of course you hide it because you don't want anyone to know how ignorant you are.

JP: Good point.

PGA: No, I agree the code has to be there for all.

JP: Along those lines, then, since we began this by talking about the last twenty years, what do you see happening next?

PGA: I don't know.

JP: Part of the fun of it, huh?

PGA: Yeah, because I truly do believe that when White Buffalo Calf was born, that when the Blue Star Kachina returned, that's what they called the Hale-Bopp Comet, that's Quetzalcoatl, it's actually a whole new game.

But if things stay going in the many directions in which they are going, certainly in publication, our voice will be heard more and more strongly, because readers love it. Far more than publishers, and far more than the academy, just readers, out there, really relate to it. Because I think that Native stories and novels and poetry speak to something that's peculiarly with America. It catches American readers, because we're all trying to figure who we are and what we're doing here. Canadian Native writers don't write that way. There's very different stuff going on up there, and south of the United States, they're writing about other kinds of things, but all American, U.S. folks are sitting around going "Who the hell are we? Where do we come from? And isn't this difficult?" We're trying to negotiate too many traditions, too many ways of understanding. And that's what Native writers are dealing with.

Among all the writers, that is why we've got to get out of ethnic literature, because the strategies for understanding it don't work for understanding Native literatures. Very little of our literature is the literature of protest, of oppression. Very little of it. Most of it is the literature of the spirit or the literature of ritual. Almost all of it is, call it political voice and drama, is always informed by the presence of this knowledge that there is always this other world with which we are always engaged. It isn't over there somewhere; it's in our presence and our midst, and we are in its presence and its midst. You can't get a text if you don't get that as a principle. You can't do that with African American literature or Chinese American literature or so on. Though I do . . . and I find all kinds of things in their works that their own critics aren't finding, because they all have a tendency to stay connected to the spirit world. Women's literature often does, too, unless it's pretending that it isn't X or Y. In which case it turns out to be something else entirely.

JP: Are you back to the genetic model [which we discussed during our final symposium meeting]?

PGA: I'm back to the genetic model of X and Y. Well, what's interesting about that is all zygotes are X, and for some reason, and nobody has talked about why (but maybe it's a mutation), one leg of the X gets dropped as the zygote becomes an [female] embryo. Okay, so then what gets lost is that socialization capacity.

For a long time feminists talked about women networking, but I know an awful lot of women who do no such thing. And so I couldn't understand . . . I knew there was something to it. It doesn't matter where I go. I sit down, and we start talking about babies and shopping and hairdos, and we're fine. All the woman needs are the culture she comes from and to share all this. And then there's the boy culture, the football and the sports, et cetera. Men tend not to communicate. All the studies show it, and they just don't, and that's their way. And then women are at them all the time, "But you don't talk, but you won't share." But then this study came out, and it was published in *Nature* magazine in June 1997 . . . It explained to me the difference between the male and the female, and I think it's significant.

Certainly in a Native world you have strongly gendered traditions, and you can't really say "Kiowa is," you have to say Kiowa male or Kiowa female, because they really are different, and that's very important in oral traditions, and it continues to inform the literature. Look at the treatment of women in Welch and Momaday and so on compared to the treatment of women in Allen or Hogan what have you. It's not that we sit around and think, Well, let's see, the woman's tradition is . . . You just grow up, being informed of these things, and nobody says, "That's the Indian way." It's just part of what you learn from your folks. They seldom identify it in any way, so you just think, That's how reality is—at least, that is how your reality is, at least, that is how your reality works. It's going back to this genetic code for how we understand reality. There's a male code and there's a female code. Neither one is better or more important, obviously, or they wouldn't both be here, would they? And the truth is probably

more complex than that. There's probably, like, nine genders. I was just reading about the Eskimos—they didn't say Inuit—a very contemporary documentary on the number of genders that these people experience within their communities. And if you look at the genders we recognize, there's male, female, homosexual male, bisexual male, lesbians who go both ways, estrogen conscious, but also in another valence, then there's the true hermaphrodite, and there's probably variations within there, like there's people with fundamental heterosexual feelings who have strong homosexual pulls, and that's probably pretty common. In each case there's the male partner and the female partner. There's people with XXY chromosomes and XYY chromosomes, and all of this is going to have an effect not just on gender but on consciousness. But the tribal people pay attention to this, and the modern people try to eradicate these differences.

JP: Uni—

PGA: Exactly, there's only one way. Instead of saying there are many ways and we need them all, unless this were true, we wouldn't all be here. It seems to me fairly straightforward.

And that goes for criticism too. Back to your question: what will happen, if we're lucky, is that American scholars will continue to work the way most of us are working, which is to open it up. Open it up.<sup>2</sup> As chaos theory . . . and there's some new stuff that I can't remember the name of, change theory or something like that, and I haven't had time to research it, but something called the principle of mediocrity, which is the idea of the golden mean or the median: anything that is will tend toward balance, will tend toward the median, which opens up everything. You don't have to find the extremes, because what will happen is that the patterns will keep reiterating, but that also means varying. So we will always come back to what it was, but it will always go away from what it was.

JP: Well, that kind of fits in with what you were talking about this morning, especially with the image of the swirling water. It's [the worldviews of Natives and non-Natives] fundamentally a very minor shift in one's point of view, but it's a world apart.

PGA: You're right. It turns out to be major, and all you have to do is shift your eyes a little bit, and suddenly you realize that wider pattern: it's the tree pattern, it's the hill pattern, it's the grass pattern, it's the literature discussion pattern, is the . . . is the . . . is the . . . and they are all singing to each other, you know, which is of course what we say. It was a dance, sweetheart. There's Joy Harjo. And that's exactly why it works. "Something sacred is going on in the universe," Momaday says. Or "Grandson, this earth is fragile." And we're all saying the same thing. I'm saying chaos, Mandelbrot set, Julius [Ruis] set, pay attention here, look at fractals. Because in this way we can explain not only our literature, but now everybody, once we develop these processes appropriately, we'll be able to give a fair shake to anybody's book, to take the book itself on its merits, where it comes from, rather than trying to make it an issue like the canonical blah blah blah. Well, who cares? What is it? Not, what is it like?

JP: Yeah, that's a good point. It has to go that way, doesn't it? If it doesn't, we're in deep trouble.

PGA: It just terrifies me.

JP: It's going to be just that much more fragmentary and divisive.

PGA: Balkanized, as they like to say in the States. Fragmented. Bricolage! [Earlier in the day there was a long discussion about the implications of this French term.]

JP: Bricolage! Let's talk about your bricolage.

PGA: I'll tell you about my bricolage; I huffed and I puffed and I couldn't blow it down.

JP: Wonderful . . . wonderful. So what's on for you next? What about writing?

PGA: I've been working on a book called *The Seven Generations*. It's supposed to be a book about Native spiritual systems. A sort of "how to be an Indian without even really trying." Everything you ever wanted to know about being an Indian but were afraid to ask. But I really mean that in the sense of what I mentioned in the talk today. There's this mythic sense and there is this way of perceiving, and that the dances are somehow connected to that, so you can't just get a drum and sit around and chant and feel