

Indian Aesthetics: Literature

As a field of study, Indian literature may be defined as literature by Indians about Indians.¹ This is a provisional guideline rather than a hard and fast rule, since many Indian writers, being Americans who spend much of their time among non-Indians, write books that include both Indian and non-Indian characters. For the most part, however (like other American ethnic writers – Jews, Blacks, Asians, for instance) Indians tend primarily to write about their own ethnic group.

Before contact with whites, Indians in North America had a strong literary tradition, which was for the most part oral.² The principal forms were the tale and song. The tale was primarily narrative, but to an extent the narrator's mimicry of characters resembled drama. Songs were primarily musical rather than literary, but their lyrics made them a species of lyric poetry as well. The traditions of tales and songs remain strong among the tribes, and have influenced Indian literature in English, which is the principal focus of this chapter.

Indians have been writing in English since 1768 when Samson Occom, a Mohegan, composed an autobiographical essay. Occom's later work, 'Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian' (1772), was, according to intellectual historian Jace Weaver (Cherokee), 'an early best-seller' in New England. The first novel by an Indian writer is Cherokee journalist Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit*, published in 1854. Ridge, a fugitive from Oklahoma for a political murder of a fellow Cherokee, gives a highly sympathetic and melodramatic portrayal of Murieta as a 'Mexican-American Robin Hood,' to quote Weaver.

Until 1968 Indian writers produced only a handful of novels, the best of which were *Sundown* (1934) by John Joseph Matthews (Osage), and *The Surrounded* (1936) by D'Arcy McNickle (Cree/Metis, enrolled Salish).³ The books could not show more different pictures of Indian life in the first half of the twentieth century. *Sundown* is the story of an Osage man, Chal Windzer, who enrolls at the University of Oklahoma. He plays football and joins a fraternity. His problems concern defining himself and finding an identity, and unable to do this to his satisfaction at the University, he drops out and joins the Army. The novel ends on an ambiguous note, with Chal stating his purpose to attend law school.

Despite his affluent background – the Osages came into substantial wealth through discovery of oil on their lands – Chal's problems are not trivial. Osages found that their wealth did not shield them fully from the severe psychological stresses caused by the assault on their traditional culture. There are mixed-blood Salish with some money in McNickle's *The Surrounded*, but for the most part the disoriented Indians in the book do not have wealth to cushion the shock of the damage to their traditional lifestyle. McNickle employs the bleakest sort of naturalism to depict the destruction of Indian characters who never have a chance in a world they cannot understand.

Before 1968 Indians produced a few works in other genres besides the novel. In the late nineteenth century, Alexander Posey (Creek) wrote highly romantic poetry, along with far more sophisticated political satires that still make interesting reading. Lynn Riggs (Cherokee) wrote several successful plays, the best known of which, *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1930), was the basis for the musical *Oklahoma!*

The year 1968 marks a watershed in Indian intellectual achievement in the United States. The publication of N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn* began what has come to be called the 'American Indian renaissance'.⁴ Since *House* appeared, Indian writers have published over 200 novels.⁵

Momaday's success inspired a generation of Indian writers, most prominent of whom are James Welch (Blackfeet), Leslie Silko (Laguna), Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa), and Louise Erdrich (Chippewa). A second generation has now appeared, the most successful of whom is Sherman Alexie (Spokane).

Indian writers have influenced each other greatly. Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* is about a soldier who returns home from the Second World War psychologically damaged. Welch's first novel, *Winter in the Blood*

(1974), is about a feckless protagonist who drifts aimlessly in a Montana landscape that Welch depicts as a wasteland, with a conscious reference to T. S. Eliot's use of the Myth of the Holy Grail. Leslie Silko's first novel, *Ceremony* (1977), borrows Momaday's damaged veteran and Welch's wasteland setting, only she uses Laguna myths about the responsibility of the hero for the health of the land instead of the Grail Myth.⁶ In order to tell her story she invents a form Momaday calls a 'telling,' which goes far further than Eliot, Hemingway, or Fitzgerald in incorporating the myths into her narrative. Momaday adapts this new form in his next novel, *The Ancient Child* (1989), which culminates with the hero turning into a bear. In Vizenor's first novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), the hero had turned into a bear. In Louise Erdrich's novel *The Bingo Palace* (1993), one of the heroines turns into a bear.⁷

Although works by Indians reflect particular tribal viewpoints, as well as general American views and values, we may discern certain aspects of a pan-Indian aesthetic. In particular, this manifests itself in a series of inter-related themes, most important of which are the relationship of a tribe to particular lands, connections to tribal traditions and languages, relationships of Indians to nature in general and animals in particular, and assumptions about concepts of time. These concepts are so interwoven that it is difficult to discuss them separately.

We begin with Indians' relationship to the land, but because this is tied up with religion, which is often given expression in stories, we must discuss these things together. Indian writers generally have a very strong sense of place in their novels. Scott Momaday, who began the American Indian renaissance with the virtually simultaneous publication of his novel *House Made of Dawn* and memoir *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, is particularly adept at delivering a powerfully rendered setting. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* takes place in western Oklahoma, where Scott was born. *House Made of Dawn* is set in Jemez, New Mexico, where he grew up. Momaday establishes a pattern in *House* in which he begins a section of the novels by describing the land, then moves to the indigenous fauna, and finally gets to the people who inhabit the place. The section entitled 'July 28' begins:

The canyon is a ladder to the plain. The valley is pale in the end of July when the corn and melons come and age and slowly the fields are made ready for the yield, and a faint false air of autumn – an illusion still in the land – rises somewhere away in the high north country, a vague suspicion of red and yellow on the farthest summits

. . . There is a kind of life that is peculiar to the land in summer – a wariness, a seasonal equation of well-being and awareness. Road runners take on the shape of motion itself, urgent and angular . . . Higher, among the hills and mesas and sandstone cliffs there are foxes and bobcats and mountain lions . . . (pp. 54–6)

Momaday describes other wild animals, mentions domestic animals, and finally getting to human inhabitants. He starts with the original denizens, the Anasazi (a Tanoan word for 'Old Ones') before moving to the people who currently occupy the town of Walatowa, a traditional tribal name for Jemez Pueblo.

The lyricism and intense feeling of this passage, which in its entirety stretches three pages, is indicative of the passion Momaday feels for the country around Jemez. It is true that until Americans became urbanized or suburbanized, many of them felt a love and sense of belonging to a particular area. As Malcolm Cowley writes in *Exile's Return*:

Somewhere the turn of a dirt road or the unexpected crest of a hill reveals your own childhood, the fields where you once played barefoot, the kindly trees, the landscape by which all others are measured and condemned.⁸

Cowley, obviously moved himself, continues for over a page in this lyrical vein describing bottom lands and cornfields. But, the feeling Cowley is describing is a good deal weaker than the Indian passion for their lands. For Indians the love of land is rooted in traditional tribal religion, even if they are also Christian.⁹ In his religious manifesto *God is Red*, Vine Deloria (Sioux) explains that in their religion and philosophy white Americans valorize time, whereas Indians give priority to space – that is, land:

When the domestic ideology is divided according to American Indian and Western European immigrant . . . the fundamental difference is one of great philosophical importance. American Indians hold their lands – places – as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind. Immigrants review the movement of their ancestors across the continent as a steady progression of basically good events and experiences, thereby placing history – time – in the best possible light.¹⁰

The religious consequence of this philosophical difference is that to Indians the sacred involves a place, 'be it a river, a mountain, a plateau, valley, or other natural feature.'¹¹ For Euro-Americans the sacred involves an event, for example, the crucifixion, or the original Passover.

Another way to describe the difference between white and Indian attitudes is to state that Indians think in terms belonging to the land, being part of it, whereas whites tend to think in terms of owning it but not being controlled by it. Frank Pommersheim, in his examination of Indian law, *Braid of Feathers*, explains the Indian perspective: 'Land is basic to Indian people; they are part of it and it is part of them; it is their Mother.'¹² In explaining the white viewpoint, Pommersheim quotes Frederick Jackson Turner:

To *take* possession without being possessed: to take secure hold on the lands beyond and yet hold them at a rigidly maintained spiritual distance. It was never to merge, to mingle, to marry. To do so was to become an apostate from Christian history and so be kept in an eternal wilderness.¹³

A repeated theme in the fiction of Indian writers is that the health of the land and the health of its people are intrinsically related. In *House Made of Dawn*, the protagonist Abel, suffers from what we would call today post-traumatic stress syndrome. He has returned from the Second World War badly scarred emotionally. Instinctively he knows that his recovery is tied to regaining a sense of his place in his world, the world of Walatowa and its environs. He somehow intuits that a song may be the key to reforging his link to the land.

He was alone, and he wanted to make a song out of the colored canyon, the way the women of Torreón made songs upon their looms out of colored yarn, but he had not got the right words together. It would have been a creation song; he would have sung lowly of the first world, of fire and flood, And of the emergence of the dawn from the hills. (p. 57)

Eventually Abel finds the song: a relative, Benally, teaches him the Navajo creation song 'House Made of Dawn.' At the end of the novel Abel sings the song as he runs in a traditional Walatowan rite, a long-distance race for good hunting and harvests. The runners traverse the reservation, bonding with the land in the process. It is clear that Abel is finally on his way to spiritual and physical health.

Like songs, stories are important in the process of restoring a land, or maintaining order there. This theme is central to the work of Leslie Silko (Laguna), another writer who links the health of a character with the state of his tribal lands. In *Ceremony* the protagonist Tayo, a Second World War veteran, has an even more severe case of post-traumatic stress syndrome than Abel. Tayo is severely delusional, and treatments offered by white psychiatrists have not been able to cure him. Tayo served in the Philippines, and his problems stem from seeing his brother killed by a Japanese soldier, and from the rash prayer he made that the incessant rains would stop. His prayer has resulted in a drought on the Laguna reservation. Tayo abandons white medicine for treatment by shamans, the most important being an old Navajo named Betonie who outlines a quest for Tayo, involving the rescue of a herd of spotted cattle from a white man's fenced field, and a battle with witches. With the aid of two mysterious and perhaps divine figures, Mountain Lion and his wife, Abel completes his sacred task, bringing the rain which ends the drought and restores the reservation.

Silko permeates her novel with Pueblo myths, the stories which her people tell to maintain order in their universe. Although they may seem familiar to many American readers for their similarity to the myth of the Holy Grail – the wasteland, the questing hero, the mysterious female helper, the freeing of the waters – the myths are native to Laguna and other Keresan pueblos. It is a common modernist technique to incorporate myth into fiction: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Malamud use the Grail Myth, in fact. However, what Silko is doing is different. As Louis Owens (Choctaw) puts it,

Silko moves far beyond anything imagined by T. S. Eliot when he wrote on the usefulness of mythological structures in literature. Rather than a previously conceived metaphorical framework within which the anarchy and futility of 'real' (as opposed to mythic) existence can be ordered, as often occurs in modernist texts, mythology in *Ceremony* insists upon its actual simultaneity with and interpenetration into the events of the everyday mundane world.¹⁴

In traditional Indian societies telling sacred stories is a way of maintaining the order of the world, or restoring it if it has been damaged. Before she begins her narrative, Silko tells the reader about the stories s/he will encounter in her tale:

I will tell you something about stories. . .

They aren't just entertainment.

Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,

all we have to fight off

illness and death.

Incorporating the stories in the narrative makes the novel itself a ceremony, a set of stories aimed at healing the fractured lives of her people.

Momaday, impressed with Silko's use of the 'telling,' employs the form in *The Ancient Child*, a book that infuses Kiowa myth into a realistic novel. This interchange – Silko borrows Momaday's psychically damaged veteran; Momaday in turn borrows Silko's new form – shows the high degree of awareness of each others' work that Indian writers have. The most relentless borrower from his Indian colleagues was the late Louis Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee). He delighted in paying *hommage* to fellow Indian writers by putting their characters into his novels. In *Bone Game* (1994) alone, there are allusions to Momaday's Juan Reyes Fragua, Welch's Pretty Weasel, Silko's Emo, Vizenor's Evil Gambler, and Erdrich's Gordie Kashpaw.

In discussing Indians' relationship to their lands, it is important to mention that the sacred nature of the land is related to the traditional tribal views concerning indigenous spirits who live there. Although contemporary authors may not hold these beliefs personally any longer, they still employ them as the basis of their fictive worlds. As a result, the literary geography of Indian fiction has a supernatural dimension. Gerald Vizenor uses the term 'mythic verism' to describe events in his work like the metamorphosis of a man into a bear. Louis Owens calls Erdrich's use of a fantastic dimension in her work 'mythic realism,' and cites Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 'magical realism' as its source. The basis of both South American and Native American magical realism lies in the conflict between traditional tribal and modern Western beliefs. What critic Amaryll Chanady says of South American writers can be applied to American Indian authors as well:

The presence of the supernatural is often attributed to the primitive or 'magical' Indian mentality, which coexists with European rationality . . . Magical realism is thus based on reality, or a world with which the author is familiar, while expressing the myths and superstitions of the American Indians. (pp. 11,19)

Although Chanady's point is valid about the different mentalities at work in Indian fiction, her language is deplorable: it is gratuitous and insulting to call people who believe in a world peopled by spirits 'superstitious,' and misleading to call them 'primitive.' In much of America many of the people who believe the world is full of spirits – and only 6,000 years old – are evangelical Christians, and they are far more likely to be white than Indian. Most Indians today believe in the scientific paradigm. If Silko gets sick, she sees a doctor, not a shaman. Nonetheless, for the purposes of literature, Indian writers employ the traditional tribal beliefs. In some cases the writers actually hold the beliefs; in others they treat them as valid within the world of their novels.

To move to the second of the related points, the use of tribal traditions basing modern novels on myths and on the archetypal characters which appear in tribal tales, is quite common among Indian writers. Far and away the most important archetype in traditional tribal tales is the trickster, the cultural hero of virtually all North American tribes.¹⁵

Gerald Vizenor is the writer who first comes to mind when the trickster is mentioned. Vizenor is a trickster who writes novels about tricksters in the hope of inculcating trickster values in his readers. His first novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, is a frame tale in which a trickster, Saint Louis Bearheart, steals time from his Bureau of Indian Affairs job to write a science fiction novel about a group of tricksters who try to survive in America after the country has literally run out of gas, and the government is commandeering reservation trees for fuel.

The principal leader of the band of tricksters in *Bearheart*, Proud Cedarfair, has a climactic showdown with a common tribal villain, the Evil Gambler. Vizenor came across the Evil Gambler in Chippewa tales,¹⁶ but he also figures in Pueblo mythology, and Silko includes a story about him in *Ceremony*. Proud's credo,

Outwit but never kill evil . . . evil revenge is blind and cannot be appeased by the living. The tricksters and warrior clowns have stopped more evil violence with their wit than have lovers with their lust and fools with the power and rage . . .¹⁷

is not always the trickster ethic, since there are many Indian tricksters with blood on their hands. For instance, Nanabozho kills a monster called the Windigo who has been terrorizing the Chippewa. And Proud himself is responsible for the death of the Evil Gambler. Vizenor has a point, however

since tricksters are primarily comic figures who refuse to be serious even in the face of evil. They view life as a game. As Vizenor puts it, 'the trickster is a comic liberator in a narrative . . .'¹⁸

Vizenor has inveighed against social science formulations about the nature of the trickster, but it seems fair to say that the trickster is a reification of the Saturnalian spirit, more interested in ignoring authority and indulging his appetites than in fighting evil. When called upon, the trickster does his duty to his tribe and faces up to evil, but he uses his wit and keeps his sense of humor.

Vizenor may have been the first Indian novelist to base a character on the trickster, but the practice has become common. Louise Erdrich is also Chippewa, and her trickster, Gerry Nanapush, is, like Vizenor's *Proude Cedarfair*, an avatar of Manabozho. In fact, Nanapush is a variant of the name Manabozho, since transliteration of Chippewa terms varies quite a bit. Gerry is an escape artist who appears in three of Erdrich's novels. Like the archetypal Trickster, Gerry plays tricks, and is the victim of tricks. He is a figure of enormous appetites and zest for life. Beyond good and evil, he violates society's laws and taboos, yet remains sympathetic to the reader. As his stepfather Beverly Lamartine puts it in *Love Medicine*, Gerry is 'both a natural criminal and a hero.'¹⁹

Gerry has spent much of his life in prison, his chief offense being breaking out. Despite his enormous bulk – he is 6 feet four inches tall, and weighs 320 pounds – he is able to disappear from a restaurant, leap from a third-story window without being hurt, hide in a car trunk, and break into an apartment by climbing up a skylight shaft. Gerry manages to get his wife Dot pregnant in the visiting room of a prison, hiding in the corner that the close-circuit camera cannot reach. Gerry is last seen in *Tales of Burning Love*, Erdrich's fifth novel in the *Little No Horse* series. He has broken out of prison, and is dressed in drag to escape the notice of the police. Gender-bending is common in trickster tales; in fact, at times the trickster is androgynous. Wakdjunkaga (Winnebago) carries the trick furthest, making himself a vagina out of an elk's liver, marrying the chief's son and actually bearing several children before he is found out.²⁰

Many Indian writers flavor their works with phrases from their tribal languages in order to give them an atmosphere of ethnic authenticity. The ability of Indians to speak their traditional languages has waned in the past half century. The early twentieth-century government policy of making Indians speak only English failed badly; despite severe corporal punishment at boarding schools, Indians kept speaking their tribal languages.

When the government abandoned this cruel policy, the desire to assimilate accomplished what force could not: Indians found to their dismay that their children often resisted learning their traditional languages, preferring to speak English.²¹ Now, for the most part, only Indians in their sixties or older are fluent in traditional languages.

To combat the loss of languages, tribes and universities in western states have instituted language programs and courses. The University of Oklahoma, for instance, teaches Cherokee, Choctaw, Kiowa, and Creek. Few major Indian novelists speak much of their traditional language, though many use phrases in their work. For instance, Gerald Vizenor employs a number of Chippewa phrases in his works, and Thomas King, a mixed-blood Cherokee, uses Cherokee chapter headings in his novel *Green Grass Running Water*,²² although the book is primarily about the Blackfoot. Louise Erdrich has been learning Chippewa, and she increasingly makes use of it in her novels. In her first book, *Love Medicine*, she employed only a few Indian words, and these were Cree, which was the *lingua franca* of Turtle Mountain reservation.²³ In the last novel in the *Machimanito* series, *Last Report of the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Erdrich used paragraph-long passages of Chippewa.

Perhaps the most interesting use of a traditional tribal language in a contemporary Indian novel occurs in the late James Welch's *Fools Crow* (1986), a historical novel set in Montana in the second half of the nineteenth century when the Blackfeet were still an independent nation, not yet conquered by the US Cavalry.²⁴ Naturally they spoke Blackfeet, and Welch has the problem of all historical novelists, film-makers and others: how to give characters a language that somehow represents their culture but is still apprehensible to the reader or audience. Directors of westerns have traditionally resorted to very formal English, devoid of contemporary colloquialisms, delivered by unsmiling Tonto figures in a dreary monotone. The most successful writers of historical novels construct a dialect that is essentially English but is littered with enough foreign terms that it seems authentic. In *Waverley*, for instance, Walter Scott peppered the dialect of his Scottish characters with a few Highland terms like 'droghling coghling bailie,' and left the final consonant off a few words (o') to give the flavor of Highland speech.²⁵

Welch pretty much follows Scott's example. He writes essentially standard English, but adds to it some Blackfeet words – *Kis-see-no-o* (coyote) and a larger number of literal translations from Blackfeet like 'many-face man' or 'white man's water' to give the flavor of Blackfeet speech. Welch

highly skilled writer, with a fine ability to portray contemporary speech, he succeeds in giving an air of verisimilitude to *Fools Crow*.

The American Indian literary renaissance includes an explosion in the publication of poetry as well as prose. In fact, Indian writers are unique among American writers in that they have been successful in more than one genre. Momaday, Welch, Silko, Vizenor, Erdrich, and Alexie all began as poets. Momaday and Vizenor have had plays produced, and Alexie has written one film (*Smoke Signals*) and written and directed another (*The Business of Fancydancing*, also the title of a collection of poems by Alexie).

Scott Momaday began his writing career as a poet, and in fact originally planned to make *House Made of Dawn* a suite of poems rather than novel.²⁶ Momaday studied with Yvor Winters at Stanford, and his early poems, like Winters', are heavy on Latinate diction. Typical of this sort of poetry is his description of a mouse: 'His frailty discrete, the rodent turns, looks,' ('Buteo Regalis') and a snake: 'His cordate head meanders through himself:/ Metamorphosis' ('Pit Viper').²⁷ However, soon Momaday moved to the repetitive rhythms of traditional Indian songs:

Remember my horse running
 Remember my horse
 Remember my horse running
 Remember my horse.

Remember my horse wheeling
 Remember my horse
 Remember my horse wheeling
 Remember my horse.²⁸

James Welch, the Blackfeet writer who came into prominence shortly after Momaday did, introduced surrealism into Indian verse. 'Magic Fox' is perhaps the best example. The poem begins:

They shook the green leaves down,
 those men that rattled
 in their sleep. Truth became
 a nightmare to their fox.
 He turned their horses into fish,
 Or was it horses strung
 like fish, or fish like fish
 hung naked in the wind.²⁹

Explicating surrealist poems is a questionable enterprise, but it would seem that 'Magic Fox' is about dreaming. The dreamers – 'those men that rattled in their sleep' – dream of horses and fish in this passage, and later in the poem, stars and a beautiful girl. A trickster in the form of magic fox controls these dreams, causing the dream images to metamorphose.

Surrealism is the art of dreams and dream visions. French in origin, with roots in Dada and Symbolism, it spread through Spain to Latin America. The chief influence on Welch's poetry comes from Peruvian poet César Vallejo, whose works Welch encountered chiefly through the translations of James Wright and Robert Bly. Surrealism appealed to Welch because there is a similarity between the dream visions of some of the surrealists and the dream visions which form the basis of the spiritual life of the Blackfeet and other plains tribes. Welch's novel *Fools Crow* centers on the experiences of a hero whose life is guided by his dreams through the intervention of an animal helper. Welch's poem 'Getting Things Straight' describes a hawk and ends with the line: 'Is he my vision?'³⁰

In Welch's poetry the dreams are often malevolent or threatening. 'Picnic Weather' begins:

I know the songs we sang,
the old routine, the dozen masks
you painted when we left you
alone, afraid, frightened of yourself
the day the bull snakes rose,
seething out of dreams, has made you
what you are – alone, afraid, stronger.³¹

Here the snakes that rise seething from dreams seem to symbolize and frighten sexual threats from within the mind itself.

Sherman Alexie, the best of the Indian writers of the second generation of the Indian renaissance, shows the influence of Welch in his verse. Kent Chadwick put it in a review of Alexie's collection of poems 'The Business of Fancydancing,' Alexie's writing builds on the naked realism and ironic wonder of . . . James Welch . . . [and] adds a surrealist twist . . . 'Crazy Horse Speaks' exemplifies this. It begins:

I discovered the evidence
In a vault of The Mormon Church
3,000 skeletons of my cousins

in a silence so great
 I built four walls around it
 And gave it a name.
 I called it Custer
 and he came to me
 again in a dream.
 He forgave all my sins.

The best of Indian poets are masters of their craft, and students of the best masters in their field. Scott Momaday has a PhD in American Literature from Stanford, where he focused on the reaction against the romantic movement in nineteenth-century America, and particularly the poetry of the period. James Welch studied with Richard Hugo at the University of Montana, getting a thorough grounding in European and Latin American, as well as American, poetry. Sherman Alexie is more of an auto-didact than Momaday or Welch, yet he is thoroughly familiar with poetic tradition. As Chadwick observes: 'In the title poem, "The Business of Fancydancing," Alexie makes striking use of the classical sestina form of Dante and the French Provençal troubadours.'³³ But Indian poets also make use of their own traditions, for example in Alexie's 'Reservation Love Song':

I can meet you
 In Springdale buy you beer
 & take you home
 in my one-eyed Ford.

Here Alexie is referring to the refrain of a well-known '49' song. These songs, which originated with the Kiowa, are an interesting development showing the vitality and adaptability of Indian cultural forms. The songs are a modern adaptation of the traditional war-journey songs women sang when their loved ones went into battle. The custom of singing '49' songs spread from the Kiowa to all corners of Indian Country. Today groups gather after powwows to sing 49s, which consist of several minutes of verses, sung to the accompaniment of a drum, culminating with a refrain, generally in English. One of the best known refrains is:

I don't care if you're married I still love you
 I don't care if you're married
 After the party's over,
 I will take you home in my one-eyed Ford.³⁴

Diane Burns (Chemehuevi, Chippewa) begins her poem 'Big Fun' with this refrain, and concludes it with another: 'I'm from Oklahoma/I got no one to call my own.'³⁵ That traditional songs could adapt, survive, and find their way into contemporary poetry is a sign of the dynamic nature of contemporary Indian culture.

Indian drama has not been as successful as fiction and poetry in the United States during the Indian renaissance, although Hanay Geiogamah (Kiowa) has had some success.³⁶ His scathing but humorous play *Body Indian* was produced off Broadway by LaMama Company in the 1970s.

In conclusion, Indian literature has flourished enormously in the past four decades, to the point where one can say with confidence that it is the full equal of other American ethnic literatures – Jewish, African American, Asian – although its practitioners are not as well known as Saul Bellow, Toni Morrison, or Amy Tan.

NOTES

1. Theoretically, of course, any work by an Indian would qualify as Indian literature, but there seems little point in a course on Indian literature in studying *Gorky Park* by Martin Cruz Smith (Senecu del Sur), since the discussion would have to center on Russian geography and politics rather than on any matter concerning Indians. The same might be said of *The Master Butcher's Singing Club*, the latest novel by Louise Erdrich (Chippewa), since although she is undoubtedly one of the best and best known Indian novelists writing today, the book is primarily about Germans in North Dakota.
2. The principal exception would be the *Walam Olum*, a Delaware epic which was written as a series of pictographs. Some scholars question the authenticity of the poem. For a discussion of the controversy, see Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live*, p. 48.
3. For a list of Indian novels see Louis Owens, *Other Destinies* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 283ff.
4. Momaday is Kiowa on his father's side, and Cherokee on his mother's.
5. See Owens, *Other Destinies*.
6. The Laguna myths and the Grail myths are remarkably similar in the respect of the linkage between the fate of the hero and his land.
7. Bears were sacred animals to many tribes. See for instance, Momaday's *In the Bear House* (New York: St Martin's, 1999).
8. Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return* (New York: Viking, 1951), p. 13.
9. Indians often practise what is called 'religious dimorphism' – that is, they practise one religion but also hold sacred elements of another.
10. Vine Deloria, Jr, *God is Red* (Golden: North American Press, 1992) pp. 62, 63.
11. Deloria, *God is Red*, p. 67.