
Simone Pellerin

Université Paul Valéry - Montpellier III

Preface

The essays in the present volume are the crop of a fruitful symposium held at Université Paul-Valéry in Montpellier, on May 16 and 17, 2008—the second in an ongoing series devoted to Native American literature, which started in 2006 around the figure of Gerald Vizenor.¹ In the task, I was lucky to be helped by excellent scholars: to my mentor, Pr. LaVonne Brown Ruoff, I am grateful for putting me, in the early stages of organizing the event, in touch with most distinguished specialists; by mid-course, all the prospective participants were decidedly helpful in responding to my questions eagerly and most efficiently, giving me a hand in shaping the whole event; finally, Pr. John Purdy, who stayed at our university with the Fulbright Senior Specialist Program, offering our community a number of lectures, was a decisively strong support for the load of work that befalls the lonely organizer facing the last stretch. It was a very exciting and constructive experience, my—our—only regret being that Pr. Kimberley Blaeser could not join us in the end, so you will not find her paper in this volume, a pity. But in spite of this one very deeply felt absence, students and specialists were able to mix and exchange ideas in a congenial and animated two-day meeting.

The aim of the symposium was to make visible Native American authors of the past centuries—an area of Amerindian culture that is still little known in France, where just about everyone has heard of, and perhaps even read, Momaday and Erdrich, but imagines the literature was born overnight in 1969. Such a void I wished to contribute to filling, mainly for the students to get a sounder view of what Native American writings are, to understand how long they have traveled in the shadow of more famous authors of the canon, and see that they deserve more readers and attention than they have elicited so far, especially in France. Of course, the lack

¹ The proceedings of that first conference are collected in Simone Pellerin, ed. *Gerald Vizenor. Profils américains* n° 20. Montpellier : Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2008.

of French translations partly accounts for this ignorance, but mainly this has to do with the stereotypes we all know too well of Native Americans as semi-articulate, if romantic, children of nature in the wide, wild plains or deep woods of the New World.

Also, my aim was to offer the best of all specialists a platform from which to share their knowledge of the field and of the issues at stake, as well as discuss them, hence to address a more sophisticated readership. A very sketchy chronology of the Native American authors born in the 18th and 19th centuries is presented in the following pages, so as to offer a framework that will help place them and introduce the various essays in this collection. Of course not all those historians, poets, pamphleteers or novelists are mentioned, let alone presented, in the articles that you are about to read. But most of the prominent ones, at least, are. It then appears that there is much more work to do in the field, and my hope—which is shared by all contributors—is that such a panel of presentations will attract more aspiring scholars. For theirs is indeed a long story, that started about two hundred and forty years ago.

In the year 1772, Samson Occom, an Indian Christian convert—a Presbyterian missionary to his own people—, published in Bennington (now in Vermont) “A Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian.” Reprinted again and again over the following years, the slim booklet thus became the first Indian bestseller. Four years earlier, in 1768, Occom had published “A Short Narrative of my Life,” that was to remain out of print for more than a century.² Few people nowadays are aware that written Native American Literature in English was born there and then. Ever since Occom’s days there has been no interruption whatsoever in the publication by Indians of poems, sermons, autobiographies, travel accounts, protest literature, tribal histories, ethnographic works, as well as short stories and novels. Even within the US, it was only in the 1970s that for the first time the American readership at large met with an assertive and constantly expanding Native stream in the national literary production.

For one thing, the literature of a dominated people—at times an all but extinct people—is bound to express a shared concern with identity, doom, the risk of extermination and the skills of survival. On the other hand, when a community’s roots are so close to an oral tradition, a number of traits are recurrent, whether stylistic, such as repetition, or imitation, or thematic, like acknowledgement of one’s “ancestors” or simply of “fathers” and “mothers”.

If one tries to name that common feature which has run through the writings of earlier Native authors down to our contemporaries—what all of

² It was published again in 1982 by Bernd Peyer, and again in 1994 by Arnold Krupat, as a chapter in his anthology of Native American autobiography.

them have in common in spite of their otherwise obvious differences—, it most likely comes down to this: a will to stand for unjustly despised cultures and to bear witness to the humanity of their members. Such was, after all, Occom's aim in his "Sermon": by using a "Western" kind of reasoning and by grounding his demonstration on values that were advertised by Whites as Christian traits *par excellence*, he exposed the utterly un-Christian attitude of Moses Paul's detractors and judges. No "brothers" there, but insensitive, devilish racists, for the alcohol they gave the wretched soul really was evil incarnate. The aim was much the same in William Apess' (1798-1839) defense of the Pequots and then of the tribes to be removed to Oklahoma by Andrew Jackson in 1830. Likewise, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (c. 1844-91) toured the United States, hoping to gain support and recognition from the Whites for her tribe, the Paiutes, who had been reduced to animal-like conditions in the hands of Indian agents and other officials, and were doomed to extinction on their allotted Malheur reservation. Pauline Johnson (1861-1913), Canadian born, and still famous nowadays for her poems on Indian life in the Great Lakes area, relentlessly pleaded for the understanding of the Indians, advocating that their view of life was not lawless, but noble and dignified.

Those are but a few names among the many voices that found a way to get published before the Pulitzer Prize rang the bell, so to speak, of what was labeled a "renaissance". The contributors to this volume have chosen to delve into the texts of some of them, or of their contemporaries or heirs.

In his paper, Lionel Larré undertakes to revise Samson Occom's image in the light of a notion of "survivance," as propounded notably by Gerald Vizenor. He finds traces of a subdued resistance in what is often viewed as just a Christian discourse, showing Occom's faith in the combative potential of literacy and virtue.

Such a stance, as Robert Dale Parker makes clear, is no simple feat: one has to deal with the dominant whites, their tastes and beliefs, including who they think an Indian is and should be, even if said Indian is one's own spouse. Relying on a comparison between two poems by Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, aptly titled "The Contrast," the paper indeed contrasts "what we might want to find in an early American Indian writer [...] with what we do find, and asks how what we want to find might shape what we do find." The subtle and nevertheless limpid analysis here goes for the main characteristics of this literature at large, Jane Johnston Schoolcraft herself being a case in point.

David Stirrup's essay on the "spectral presence" of Odawa historian Andrew Blackbird raises the question of how to deal with "one of many [...] neglected figures of Native literature and history, even when we in the field do not really know." Closely weaving his approach with the other

papers given at this conference, Stirrup thoroughly explores all the facets of an illuminating example of people who have almost disappeared from the records. It seems not to matter that they have spoken for their own while at the same time steering in troubled water, for their own knowledge had never been of great value in the eyes of the dominant—nor in their own, maybe, caught as they were between two worlds—but again, who knows? Though the figure of Blackbird is indeed elusive, some glimpses of his complex personality and endeavors make this irritating-endearing character admirable at times.

Rather similar may seem at first sight the case of William Warren, who wrote a history of the Ojibway people. Yet, in a subtle exercise in reading, Chris LaLonde unfolds the deft maneuvers required of one who would presumptuously write a history of the Anishinaabe from the vantage point of the Natives, in the heyday of Manifest Destiny. Warren is shown as keenly aware of the difficulty of ensuring his intellectual property rights, as we would call today the fact of knowing, telling, writing the traditions of one's native group. The historian as well as his Native informant face dispossession by the powerful White. Thrown into the role of Sheherazad, he postpones by his stories the ultimate victory of the white account. As LaLonde puts it, this mainly tells us—all of us—"about authority, loss, and writing."

A reflexive and serious stance that a cursory reading would not allow, especially with such romantically charged novels as Simon Pokagon's *Queen of the Woods*, which Bernadette Rigal-Cellard reasonably warns us not to take as it first may appear, namely "a deceptively simple and charming romance of love and death in the wild woods." After all, Pokagon, the "Red Man's Longfellow," as he was dubbed in his days, is also remembered for having sold visitors of the 1893 World Colombian Exhibition in Chicago a manifesto printed on birch bark, to protest the presentation of Indians as primitive savages. He thus seized the opportunity of the current debate and controversies related to race, such as barring African Americans from participation in the event (Peyer 2007, 241). Rigal-Cellard carefully sets the book against its historical and cultural background, to reveal its elaborate meaning.

After a breezy, youthful manifesto pleading for adoption of quantitative analysis in literature, James Mackay and his collaborators chronicle the picaresque careers of Pauline Johnson and "Chief Joe Capilano" of Vancouver, both expert at exploiting the crudest clichés of Indians, in England as well as in Canada. They then compare Johnson's synthetic *Legends of Vancouver* to literal transcriptions of Lushootseed tales—and the two are totally different. Moral: even the quantitative analyst must be circumspect!

"Looking for Ella Cara Deloria" could have been the title of Susan Gardner's contribution, for she has devoted most of her scholarly life to the Dakota ethnologist—a ten year companionship! But, beyond brushing

a personal, vivid portrayal of that strong, fascinating character, Gardner also analyzes the skilled negotiator with the white world, who followed in her father's steps, and, like her mother's mother, a "Two-woman," was seemingly endowed with the power to be "*doubled* rather than disabled." Though she was what is generally called an "assimilated Indian," her academic work appears today as "an early form of 'literary nationalism' and intellectual sovereignty."

By closely analyzing the plot, sequences, and themes in D'Arcy McNickle's posthumously published *The Hungry Generations*, a forerunner of the author's most famous *The Surrounded*, Lee Schweninger brings into relief the author's treatment of assimilation and alienation. In neither novel is there a way for the protagonist to escape the white man's world and law. Though equally pessimistic, the two different conclusions tell the reader and the analyst much about the stereotype of the "Indian" in the early 1930s, so effective a stereotype that the publishing world was not ready for an independent view on those issues, let alone an assertion of sovereignty.

John Purdy has chosen to probe major cultural differences as they are described in the novels of John Joseph Mathews and D'Arcy McNickle. Through a sustained analysis of court scenes "where conflicting stories and culturally-bound interpretations of events contend," he takes us far into the recesses of colonialism, the palette of Native negotiations of cultural change, and the moot borderline between the neat Western categories of civil and criminal offences.

For Naila Clerici, the poetry of Marilyn Dumont, though contemporary, has been fueled by the past experiences of her people. As she shows by relying on a very well informed panorama of the Métis history and culture, Dumont "connects in her poetry the drama and joy of historical past and personal present." The poems are inseparable from the writings of her forefathers—a living proof that this history is long, indeed, and continues to inspire the writers of our times.

The two essays that open and close this collection, by two exceptional scholars—renowned, respected, remarkable—are devoted to the field itself, with LaVonne Brown Ruoff giving an encompassing view of the current scholarship at this point in time, and James W. Parins closing the march.

Ruoff offers us an in-depth guided tour of the publishing history and scholarship in the field, paying due tribute to the all-important work of Daniel Littlefield and James Parins. Her masterful overview inevitably has some of the flavor of an intellectual autobiography. Also, to our delight, Ruoff cannot examine the scholarship without becoming absorbed in the writers themselves: when she comes close to any one author, her intimacy with the whole material makes the scholar turn captivating storyteller at a moment's notice.

Starting from what meaning the oral tradition has in a given society, Parins traces the developments of literacy among the Cherokee, showing both the impact and the long lasting effects it has had upon them as a Nation, not only on the society itself, as it drove a wedge between full bloods and mixed bloods, but also on the production of an impressive body of writing. A life's work is manifest here, through the fine, elaborate and comprehensive knowledge, to the authoritative distance that makes possible a serene view of the whole picture through the centuries.

For, after all, this is what it is all about: traditionally oral cultures shifting to the written word, and how individuals or tribes made the most of this new tool to assert their identity and manage a stunning survival in spite of centuries of occupation and wars in all forms imaginable. Native American literature shows such great vitality today—and the writers of the past have been pivotal in enabling their descendants to carry on.

REFERENCES

- Jaskoski, Helen, ed. *Early Native American Writing: New Critical Essays*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Kilcup, Karen L. *Native American Women's Writing, 1800-1924: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.
- Konkle, Maureen. *Writing Indian Nations: Native Intellectuals and the Politics of Historiography, 1827-1863*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- Krupat, Arnold, ed. *Native American Autobiography: An Anthology*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994.
- Larré, Lionel. *Autobiographie amérindienne. Pouvoir et résistance de l'écriture de soi*. Pessac : Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 2009.
- Peyer, Bernd C. *The Tutor'd Mind: Indian Missionary-Writers in Antebellum America*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1997.
- , ed. *The Elders Wrote: An Anthology of Early Prose by North American Indians 1768-1931*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1982.
- , ed. *The Singing Spirit: Early Short Stories by North American Indians*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989.
- , ed. *American Indian Nonfiction: An Anthology of Writings, 1760s-1930s*. Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 2007.
- Rigal-Cellard, Bernadette. *Le Mythe et la plume. La littérature des Indiens d'Amérique du Nord*. Paris : Editions du Rocher, 2004.
- Ruoff, LaVonne Brown. *American Indian Literatures: An Introduction, Bibliographic Review, and Selected Bibliography*. New York: MLA, 1990.
- Walker, Cheryl. *Indian Nation: Native American Literature and Nineteenth-Century Nationalisms*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Wiget, Andrew, ed. *Dictionary of Native American Literature*. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities. New York: Garland Publishing, 1994.