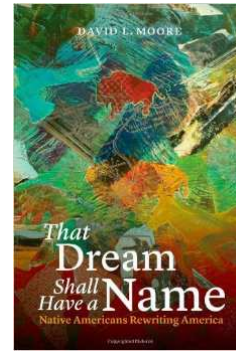




That Dream Shall Have a Name: Native Americans Rewriting America

David L. Moore

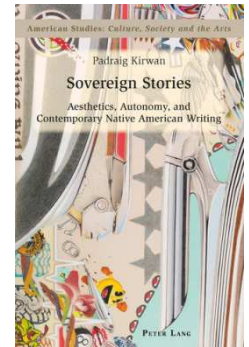
University of Nebraska Press, 2013, pp. 465



Sovereign Stories: Aesthetics, Autonomy, and Contemporary Native American Writing

Padraig Kirwan

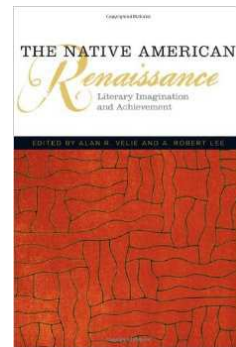
Peter Lang, 2014, pp. 342



The Native American Renaissance: Literary Imagination and Achievement

Alan R. Velie and A. Robert Lee, editors

University of Oklahoma Press, 2014, pp. 368



Review by Stefano Bosco¹

The field of Native American Studies seems to be undergoing a period of unprecedented health, given the proliferation of studies on topics ranging from history to politics, from law to visual culture, from education to literature. As to the last subject in the list, I singled out three volumes which have been published in the course of 2013 and 2014: David L. Moore's *That Dream Shall Have a Name: Native Americans Rewriting America*; Padraig Kirwan's *Sovereign Stories: Aesthetics, Autonomy, and Contemporary Native American Writing*; *The Native American Renaissance: Literary Imagination and Achievement*, edited by Alan R. Velie and A. Robert Lee. All of them are authored or edited by non-Native critics: this consideration may not sound particularly relevant to those who are not practitioners of the field, but is indeed significant in light of the increasing outpouring of Native-authored criticism over the last few years, especially on issues such as the articulation of Indian sovereignty and autonomy in literary texts. And these issues occupy center stage in at least two of the three volumes herein considered. Of course, the selection for this review article has not been made on the basis of the authors' or editors' ethnic affiliation, but mainly for the broad focus of the works which somehow facilitates a comparison among them.

I should probably state beforehand that the one which, to me, seemed to be the most valuable contribution to the field is David L. Moore's volume.² Spanning three centuries of American Indian writing, rather than

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concentrating exclusively on the contemporary scene and on the canonical figures and works, Moore examines the stories, modes, and strategies through which Indian authors have re-written the idea of America in such a way as to include, instead of excluding, its indigenous peoples. His book purports to show how such a re-writing accounts for a truly pluralist version of the US/American nation, one that instead of relying on the colonialist discourses and rhetorics of Manifest Destiny and E Pluribus Unum tries to “balance unity and diversity in the dynamic of difference as the robust energy of community” (xiii). In this respect, Moore’s study is also an attempt to move beyond a dialectic framework polarizing Euro-American and Indian worlds, toward a dialogic approach illuminating their interrelationship. To that goal, he addresses five key-issues which are at the core of Native American Studies today—sovereignty, community, identity, authenticity, irony—, and reads them across the works of five Indian authors: the Pequot minister William Apess, Papago autobiographer Sarah Winnemucca, Salish-Cree novelist and historian D’Arcy McNickle, and contemporary well-known writers Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna-Pueblo) and Sherman Alexie (Spokane). Moore provides an original re-definition of these five terms by showing how they play out in Native literary expression and sustain the life of Indian communities within the American nation: “Indigenous sovereignty becomes the dynamic of sacrifice. Community becomes animism. Identity functions paradoxically as change. Authenticity works as translation. The ironies of humor work to humanize Indigenous subjects” (14-15).

Undergirding Moore’s arguments is a number of important theoretical, ethical, pedagogical, and methodological assumptions. First, the discourse of nationhood and nationalism needs to be re-oriented from its imperialist-colonialist version to a pluralistic one that includes the realities of tribal survival and tribal sovereignty on the American continent. Second, a more serious engagement with Indian writing entails the recognition of the ways in which Native voices have repeatedly called America back to its founding principles and ideals in order to expose the distance between, on the one hand, their proclamation and, on the other hand, their social and political realization. Third, the dialogic approach enacted by Native texts invites a theory of reading that balances the aesthetics with the ethics of those texts, and grounds them into the complex of land, people, and stories animating Native communities; in other words, a ground theory that “looks at narrative structures of lives linked to stories of the soil” (27), and at “where all the voices standing on and under and over that ground may speak and be heard” (30).

Each chapter tackles one of the five issues by first presenting its treatment in one of the five authors, and then drawing the other four into conversation. Besides providing original and interesting redefinitions of those conflicted topics, Moore also offers fresh readings of both canonical and (more often) lesser-known works of Native literature—particularly valuable are the analyses of D’Arcy McNickle’s novel *Wind from an Enemy Sky* and of William Apess’s historical and political writings. Prose writing is prevailing throughout the book, but poetry is occasionally addressed as well—like, for example, the poetic inserts in Silko’s miscellaneous *Storyteller*. And after all, much of Moore’s central argument finds a strikingly powerful poetic rendering in a Simon Ortiz’s poem whose opening lines give the book its title (“That Dream Shall Have a Name”, included in the 1981 collection *from Sand Creek*).

A similar concern with such issues as Indian self-determination and nationhood in Native writing animates Pdraig Kirwan’s study *Sovereign Stories*. The author promptly highlights at the outset some of the central theoretical problems affecting any discourse on Indianness. For example, the gesture of posing a distinctive “Indian consciousness” and a number of Indian traditions at a distance from the contemporary world risks to exoticize Indian cultures and to confine them into an irreducible past-ness. Likewise, though from a different perspective, the insistence on such notions as cultural hybridization and a “shifting frontier” space can deprive Native people of a culturally and politically firm base from which to articulate a discourse of self-determination. To overcome such critical impasses, Kirwan alerts us to the necessity of recognizing “both the reality of ethnic and cultural separateness and indigenous writers’ familiarity with, use, and subversion of ‘Western practices or beliefs’” (3). Hence, his study attempts to map a distinctive indigenous space that grows out of the intersection between fictional and extra-fictional locations, in order “to assess the ways in which a particular set of novels speak not just from, but also of, indigenous worlds, and do so through a

² It should be noted that Moore’s volume is a much expanded reworking of two previous pieces, an article appearing in the journal *SAIL* 6.4 (winter 1994) and a contributed chapter to the volume *Native Authenticity: Transnational Perspectives on Native American Literary Studies* (Ed. Deborah L. Madsen. New York: State University of New York Press, 2010).



distinctive use of narrative style” (5). In a sense, such approach is not so distant from Moore’s call for a ground theory that welds the individual writers’ utterances to the network of kinship, land, and story that makes up the core of Native communities.

Sovereignty and self-determination constitute the focus of Kirwan’s analysis in the deep belief that American Indian literature has been able not only to *express* within an imaginary realm the reality of tribal autonomy but also, and more importantly, to *produce* that autonomy through the extratextual significance of literature. His interests are directed especially at the aesthetic means (form, style, imagery, rhetoric) by which this mutual (inter)penetrability has been made possible—“the specificities of narratological engagement with tribal sovereignty” (25). Hence, Kirwan’s insistence on the idea of space and territoriality serves his project of mapping the linkage between the act of writing on the page and the physical realities of Indian tribal landscapes. Borrowing Lisa Brooks’ notion of *awikhigawôgan*³ he makes the reader of Native fiction alert to the ways in which elements of the tribal worldview are infused into writing and then flow back into the place-world of Indian existence. This is a process which always requires of the non-Native reader some sort of textual negotiation between the aesthetic realm of the written word and the material conditions of indigenous settings. Upholding this “sense of the book as a territory itself” (32), Kirwan proceeds in the following chapters to analyze a number of works by contemporary Indian authors: Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s *Aurelia* (1999), Sherman Alexie’s *Face* (2009) and *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), David Treuer’s *Little* (1995), Louise Erdrich’s *Shadow Tag* (2010), LeAnne Howe’s *Shell Shaker* (2001), Craig Womack’s *Art as Performance, Story as Criticism* (2009), and Greg Sarris’ *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* (1993).

Both Moore and Kirwan place their reading of specific texts within a larger interpretive framework which can be valued as more or less innovative, but which in any case proves to be aware of, and elaborates upon, the most recent theoretical ramifications in the field. The collective volume *The Native American Renaissance*, instead, seems to be broadly conceived as a recapitulation of critical assessments of important Native writers from the “Indian Renaissance” era (1960s-1970s) onwards. If some of the essays effectively engage the current debate over such “politicized” issues as sovereignty and community, others are more conservative in their readings of Indian literature by adopting more neutral thematic approaches. The editors, Alan R. Velie and A. Robert Lee, have been pioneers in the field of, respectively, Native American literary studies and multicultural American literature since the early 1980s. The contributions in their volume constitute a re-assessment of that fortunate expression which highly contributed to spur the field of American Indian Studies and to introduce the study of Native American writing in English into the academy. The term “Native American Renaissance” was the title of Kenneth Lincoln’s 1983 monograph on the flourishing of Native literature partly accompanying and substantially following the season of American Indian activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s—the volume even includes a highly autobiographical piece by Lincoln on the genesis and legacy of his fortunate study. As the editors make clear in the introduction, though the term has been almost invariably associated with the outpouring of written works (especially fiction) in the wake of N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1969), the so-called Indian Renaissance had firmer roots and exerted an impact on the long run which extended beyond the limits of published writing, and certainly did not confine itself solely to prose. In particular, the resurgence of Native literature was both a reflection of and a contributing factor to the manifold changes affecting Indian life in those decades, when tribal groups on the reservations obtained some tangible acknowledgment of their rights as sovereign nations, and even urban communities could develop empowering strategies in order to better face the challenges of contemporary life.

The essays that make up the volume aim to offer an updated survey of the canonical figures whose works constituted the bulk of ‘Indian Renaissance’ writing (such as N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie M. Silko, Gerald Vizenor) and of later writers that have been drawing upon that heritage across a variety of genres (just to name a few, Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, Louis Owens, and Thomas King in fiction;

³ A word of the Western Abenaki language, the term indicates the production or the ‘writing’ of *awikhigan*, i.e. a wide array of texts including maps, letters, and portraits. It also denotes the powerful, transformative activity by which these texts carry out a number of functions (from communication to persuasion, from storytelling to memorialization) whose aesthetic success is “evaluated based on its capacity as a carrier or catalyst within the network of relations”. See Lisa T. Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (Madison: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 219-220.



Simon Ortiz, Lucy Tapahonso, Ray A. Young Bear, Joy Harjo in poetry; Hanay Geiogamah in drama). The first two pieces are more general in scope, addressing the political and ethical issues surrounding the criticism of Native American literature. In particular, Jace Weaver's essay presents the recent, and sometimes self-consuming, debate centering on the tension between a tribal-national and a cosmopolitan reading of American Indian writing, while Mackay's piece discusses the alternative of an insider vs. outsider approach to the field and problematizes the very terms of the binary, showing that rigidly prescriptive classifications and separatist positions are untenable in a learning community wishing to sustain a healthy, mutually enriching debate. After more than a dozen contributions on the individual authors mentioned above, the volume features an interesting exploration of the cross-border applicability of the 'Renaissance' paradigm to the production of Canadian/First Nations indigenous writers. As previously said, the concluding piece contains Kenneth Lincoln's personal remembrances of the cultural climate and his own competing familial and professional obligations between the white and Indian world, which constituted the background for his 1983 groundbreaking study.

Among the things one would have expected to find in Velie and Lee's edited volume is an exploration of the literary antecedents of the Native American Renaissance. After all, although the expression has had many merits in highlighting the richness and autonomy of Native American cultural expression after centuries of under- and mis-representations, it nonetheless contributed to overshadow or underplay what had come before, especially in terms of literary production. Therefore, the unskilled reader remains unaware of the achievements of a previous generation of writers (such as Mourning Dove, D'Arcy McNickle, John Joseph Mathews, Lynn Riggs, John Milton Oskison) and their possible influence on the later Renaissance authors—a line of inquiry well-worth exploring.⁴ Moreover, the volume lacks a more thorough engagement with the efflorescence of Native-authored literary criticism produced over the last couple of decades, especially of a tribal-nationalist kind—epitomized in recent works by such critics as Daniel H. Justice, Lisa T. Brooks, Penelope M. Kelsey, but also in the landmark studies of its first proponents Robert A. Warrior and Craig Womack.⁵ Although, in the introduction, the editors briefly mention and recognize the legitimacy and importance of a tribal-centered approach to American Indian literature coming directly from Indian critics, they seem to be wary of welcoming such critical mode into their volume. First and foremost, such leeriness is apparent in the list of the contributors, which includes hardly any—with the possible exception of Jace Weaver and Carol Miller, both Cherokee—of the countless Native critical voices that have recently enriched the debate, featuring mostly non-Native academics instead. Quite appropriately, it is precisely Weaver's essay that takes up the issue of Native-authored criticism and provides a survey of the current debate which has recently polarized American Indian literary studies between a cosmopolitan approach (embraced by many non-Native critics) and a tribal-nationalist one (generally but not exclusively promoted by indigenous scholars). Leaning more, as a Native scholar, toward the latter position, Weaver concludes his piece by remarking that the mistakenly perceived separatism of nationalist critics should be viewed as “a pluralist separatism or, if you will, an agonistic pluralism” (34) that is willing to share critical space with outsiders and draw them into conversation, provided that they are respectful of the other side's central tenets.

There is reasonable hope that we will get to see more of this conversation with the publication of a second volume about the Native American Renaissance, which will be devoted, as the editors state in the introduction, to Native film, visual arts, and discourse. The interdisciplinary aspect is indeed a defining and fascinating feature of Native American Studies nowadays, and the three volumes chosen for this review may

⁴ Even though, in many respects, such a relationship may be more ideal than real, a discussion that puts in dialogue single works or authors from the “Renaissance” period with their equivalents from the first half of the century has not appeared so far—a comparative outlook certainly complicated by the very different historical and socio-political circumstances defining the two periods. However, it is significant that titles originally published in the 1930s and 1940s and gone long out-of-print were reprinted in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, and it would be interesting to assess if the new cultural climate on things Indian altered the original reception of those earlier works.

⁵ The expression ‘tribal-nationalist’ generally refers to a mode of Native American literary criticism that considers Indian tribes as sovereign nations within the borders of the United States and reads their cultural production not only as expression and articulation of that sovereignty, but also as contributing factor to it. Besides, this mode largely draws upon intellectual sources internal to the American Indian world in their analysis and interpretation of Native-authored works.



suggest an argument for a bias toward literature in the field, which is obviously not the case. What they certainly testify to, however, is the vitality of the debate and its multiple perspectives within American Indian literary studies. Whether concerned for tribal sovereignty and community or intrigued by the richness and relevance of indigenous literary traditions, they provide both the beginner and the specialist reader with a thorough view of what has been achieved so far, and suggest new directions for what is yet to be explored.