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Peer reviewed

Review Essay

The Drumming Earth: Five Recent Anthologies of Contemporary American Indian Literature

Peter G. Beidler

A Nation Within: Contemporary Native American Writing. An issue edited by Ralph Salisbury. *Pacific Quarterly Moana*, vol. 8, no. 1. Hamilton, New Zealand: Outrigger Publishers, 1983. 106 pp. [Prices for back issues on request from publisher at Box 13-049, Hamilton, New Zealand or at 814 Broadway, New York, NY 10003.] Paper.

A Gathering of Spirit. A special double-issue edited by Beth Brant (Degonwadonti). Issue 22/23 of *Sinister Wisdom*. Iowa City: Iowa City Women's Press, 1983. 221 pp. \$6.50 Paper. [Rpt. 1984; Sinister Wisdom Books, Rockland, Maine. 240 pp. \$7.95 Paper.]

The Clouds Threw This Light: Contemporary Native American Poetry. Edited by Phillip Foss. Santa Fe, NM: Institute of American Indian Arts Press, 1983. 351 pp., \$15.00 Paper.

Songs From This Earth On Turtle's Back: Contemporary American Indian Poetry. Edited by Joseph Bruchac. Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review Press, 1983. 300 pp. \$9.95 Paper.

Earth Power Coming: Short Fiction in Native American Literature. Edited by Simon J. Ortiz. Tsaille, Arizona: Navajo Community College Press, 1983. 289 pp. \$14.50 Cloth. \$10.50 Paper.

Literary anthologies serve two primary groups of readers. The first are non-academic readers: those who want some bit-reading for the bus between towns or for the last few minutes before the

bedlight gets turned off at night. Such readers may be quite serious but may not be capable of much concentration at those in-between-times. What they are looking for is something short, not too difficult, easily put down, and easily forgotten. Anthologies generally serve the need, and the five anthologies of contemporary American Indian literature discussed in this review should do as well as most for the bus-and-bed readers.

Literary anthologies also, however, serve the more serious needs of academic readers. Teachers like to be able to assign shorter pieces from time to time, pieces which can yield a productive hour of discussion or tie together themes developed in greater depth in book-length assignments. Anthologies of poems and short stories by American Indian writers, of course, are of particular interest to teachers in American Indian studies, for they can bring together between two covers a large number of pieces otherwise unavailable or available only in widely disparate sources.

The five anthologies discussed in this review were all published in 1983—a banner year for anthologies of contemporary literature by American Indians. There have been earlier anthologies, some more useful than others, but surely it is a good omen that we have so many available all at once. The mere presence of these five books should give encouragement to men and women of American Indian descent that there is interest in and a market for their work. It is also encouragement to teachers. Those of us who tried fifteen years ago to organize courses in American Indian studies were frustrated in most of our attempts to find reliable texts to order for our courses.

Some of these books will be more useful than others. Two have my particular recommendation as teaching texts: Joseph Bruchac's *Songs From This Earth On Turtle's Back* and Simon J. Ortiz's *Earth Power Coming*. I shall discuss these two books last in this review. First I shall consider the other three, each of which has its own merits and limitations.

A Nation Within, Ralph Salisbury, Ed.

A safe and comfortable and enlightening little book, *A Nation Within* takes its name from a sentence written by Wendy Rose: "People of Native American lineage are crossing tribal boundaries

to form a nation within the nation called the United States" (p. 4). It presents some 95 poems and five very short prose pieces by some 35 Indian writers.

The book is what might be expected from an editor who collected his material by sending out a call for manuscripts inviting people of American Indian descent to send him work "about important Native American concerns . . . ecology, extinction, sacredness of life, oneness with nature, spirit awareness, pariahhood, discrimination, injustice, resistance" (p. 4). One way or another, all of those standard "Indian themes" are represented in this volume. Indeed, many are represented in Duane Niatum's fine little story which closes the book. "Crow's Sun" is about an 18-year-old naval enlistee who is sentenced to a month-long stay in the brig for some undescribed offense. He is slapped around by an insensitive, on-duty Marine bully and in the end is deprived even of his name and given a number. Some of those themes are there, less obviously, in the delicate poems of William Oandasan, whose "Acoma" is a particular favorite of mine and whose sardonic "Surreal List" makes gentle fun of people like me, "detectives of the academic" who "investigate the poetry of oblivion/ in search of an arrest" (p. 24).

This slender anthology contains much good stuff, but it does not cry out to be adopted as a teaching text. It has neither the focus most teachers would seek in a classroom text, nor the bulk of material that would allow them to select and assign with a view to developing a focus of their own choosing. Many academic detectives will want to own a copy for their own shelves, but few will want to order it for classroom use. Some teachers who want a slender book with some breadth of genre coverage but little depth or selection may find this book useful—provided they can get copies. Most teachers, however, will find other books more suited to their classroom uses and more easily accessible.

A Gathering of Spirit, Beth Brant, Ed.

A strange and powerful book, full of wisdom and hate, peace and bitterness, *A Gathering of Spirit* is an anthology of poetry, story, art, interviews, autobiography and letters by 60 women.

The tone of the volume is announced by its triple dedication: to a woman who was raped and shot in 1976, to another who died in the same year of an overdose of morphine and codeine, and finally to "all Indian women who have survived these wars and lived to tell the tales." The book almost seethes with hurt and injustice and unfairness, with the evil inherent in almost everything associated with the non-Indian, especially the non-Indian male. We read about the foolish Columbus, about the selfish soldier, about the hypocritical missionary, about the greedy lawyer, about the grasping businessman and engineer, and about the devil disguised as a cowboy. We see two White women on a bus: "They carried on two different conversations the way people did in the city, without silences, without listening. Trying to get it all said before it was too late, before they were interrupted by thoughts" (p. 23). We hear about the White man's press, which for a century and a half has portrayed the American Indians as "savage, blood-thirsty, immoral, inhuman people," and about the visual media which train children to "kill Indians mentally, subconsciously" (pp. 150-51). Even the humor in this generally humorless anthology of American Indian writing is at the expense of White people. A poem describes an old American Indian who got a bank loan using his furniture as collateral. When he defaulted on his loan payments, the bank came to collect his furniture and found only a lot of fish crates. The last line of the poem is "laughter on the res." (p. 158).

Inevitably the tone and flavor of an anthology is to some extent controlled by its editor, the person who solicits material for it and selects from what is available. In this anthology that person is Beth Brant, who in her introduction calls herself "uneducated, a half-breed, a *light-skinned* half-breed, a lesbian, a feminist, an economically poor woman" (p. 5). Near the end of the book she reproduces a series of letters between herself and "Raven," an Indian woman on death-row in prison. "I am proud to be an Indian," Brant writes to Raven, "proud to be a lesbian" (p. 206). That pride pervades many pages of the book, for these women writers and artists find and express much to be proud of in their heritage and in their way of life. On the other hand, Brant's pride is tempered with more than a little prejudice—"sometimes I *do* think that all white people are evil"—and paranoia:

I truly believe that white man hates and craves what is inside those of us who are colored. They envy our connections to the spirit, to the earth, to a community, to a people. Because they envy that, they hate us, and will do anything to get rid of us. So all the things . . . slavery, genocide of Indians on this continent, as well as in Latin America, the Holocaust, missionaries in China, the Vietnam War . . . all of these a calculated program of extermination. And I add to that, the millions of women burned at the stake centuries ago, because we were women, because we were lesbians. (p. 206, ellipses in original)

Teachers who are considering adopting *A Gathering of Spirit* in a course in literature, American studies, American Indian studies, or Women's studies should be aware that there is some powerful writing in this book and much that will provoke useful discussion in the classroom. They should also be aware, however, that the pride, prejudice and paranoia of its editor are reflected in many of the selections. In the end, perhaps, the book is of greatest interest as a reflection of the mind and personality of Beth Brant. What she says of herself directly is interesting. What she says of herself through her selection of the writings of others is revealing. She is the most fascinating personage in the book, and we put it down feeling that we would like to know more. I predict that one day we will.

The Clouds Threw This Light, Phillip Foss, Ed.

A generous, attractive and wide-ranging book, *The Clouds Threw This Light* shows us the work of 77 poets, many of them little-known even in the inner circles of people knowledgeable in American Indian literature. We are given two or three poems by most of the writers—a total of some 200 pieces.

There is little editorial consistency or purpose to this book. Foss gives us no introduction, merely a two-sentence note telling us that this is a "poet's choice" collection composed of work by poets who were "invited to contribute what they believed to be their best work." Although Foss did do some selection, he generally printed what he was sent and so proclaims his book to be

"free of an editorial bias." As might be expected with such a selection process, the book is also of uneven quality. In this book, more than in the others considered in this review, there is a wide gap between the best poems presented and the merely average ones. Still, there is much good stuff here, and an occasional piece that will startle even the least-easily-startled readers. Who will read Linda Noel's "No Delusion" and not sit up? The speaker of this poem relates that men think having sex with an American Indian woman will be like sex with something more exciting than a mere human: "there are always men who want/ to try out indian women/ claiming we are wild and only HIS/ riding can tame us" (p. 197). Who will not sit up again to discover this speaker refers to the men who "released my own animal" by coiling themselves around "my feet and legs/ around my body/ biting my breasts/ taking my breath" (pp. 197-98)?

This book will find few classroom adoptions. It will not serve well the needs of beginning students, for we are told nothing about any of the writers except their tribal affiliation. Another problem with this anthology is its mere bulk. It almost seems that the publisher was trying to publish a coffee-table demonstration book. The pages are 8½" by 11", and the book is nearly an inch thick. White space abounds. For example, Foss prints two poems by Maurice Kenny. Neither runs to more than 38 lines, yet the Kenny section takes up six large pages of text: one page with nothing but Kenny's name and tribe; two pages for each poem (the last four lines of each appearing on their own page); and a final blank page so that the next poet can have his name and tribe appear on a right-hand page. The Bruchac volume, considered next, is much more economical. It presents fifty more poems on fifty fewer pages, each page being half the size of those in the Foss volume. Yet the Bruchac volume does not appear at all cramped or crowded. There is plenty of room for marginal notations.

I shall have a little more to say about the Foss anthology below, but let us turn now to the Bruchac anthology, one which will be of considerable interest to teachers looking for a good classroom poetry text.

Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back, Joseph Bruchac, Ed.

A comprehensive and enlightening anthology of contemporary poetry, *Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back* presents nearly 250 poems by 52 poets.

This book is in almost every way superior as a teaching text to *The Clouds Threw This Light*. Although it gives us fewer poets, it gives us more poems—an average of five by each author. Teachers will thus be able to assign enough work by each poet to give a more comprehensive view of the poet and his or her characteristic style and concerns. This effort will be aided immeasurably by Bruchac's inclusion of at least some biographical material on each poet and by a photograph or drawing of almost every poet included. These last—the biography and the photograph—should not in an ideal world be necessary, for of course we all know that the poem is independent of and more important than the poet, but they will immeasurably help the beginning student to get a feel for each poet and for the personal and literary context from which each writes. The biographies will also help students develop an interest in the literature of the American Indian, since the poetry will seem to emanate from individual people rather than from "Indian writers" in the abstract. It is unfortunate that Bruchac, like Foss, could find no better organizing principle than the English alphabet. Paula Gunn Allen wrote the first poem and Ray Young Bear the last in both collections.

In his introduction Joseph Bruchac is to be complimented for his attempt to identify five "things shared by all American Indian people." We are immediately suspicious, however, of any effort to say what all American Indian writers, let alone what all American Indians, share, but Bruchac's list is worth repeating here: (1) "respect for the Earth and the natural world"; (2) "strong folk cultures"; (3) "respect for the awesome power of the Word"; (4) "the experience of being viewed as outsiders in their own land, stereotyped and misunderstood"; and (5) "a high level of accomplishment" (p. xvi). I might quibble with certain items on the list, but perhaps it is enough to point out that Bruchac himself admits to the great variety of American Indian experience and writing and, by implication, to the virtual impossibility of making any but the most general of statements about a shared experience or accomplishment.

We are better off speaking of specifics than of general characteristics, and individual readers will find their own individual poems or poets to admire in this collection. Among my own favorites in this and the Foss volume is Nila NorthSun. Her poem "falling down to bed" in the Bruchac volume describes the speaker's growth from disgust at the drunks sleeping in the dirt and grass to an understanding of why they do it. She describes the time she got "shit faced drunk" at a pow wow and wanted to lie down in the dirt parking lot herself: "it seemed nice/ the ground was clean in the darkness/ the stars were vibrant above/ the night air was cozy" (p. 171). And her "Trying To Get His Attention" in the Foss volume is a stunning account of a woman who, as she lies in bed alone while her man is out drinking, considers cutting her wrists and wonders when he would notice that she was dead: "you probably wouldn't notice/ the dampness of the sheets/ & probably being so drunk & tired/ you wouldn't even notice that/ you lay in a warm puddle" (p. 200). One might have hoped, of course, that the editors would spell her name correctly or even consistently: In Foss she is variously "nila northSun," and "Nila northSun." In Bruchac she is "Nila Northsun" in one place and "Nila NorthSun" in another. It would be capital if editors could agree on how to spell the name of so fine a poet.

Earth Power Coming, Simon J. Ortiz, Ed.

A comprehensive and attractive collection of short fiction by contemporary American Indians, *Earth Power Coming* will be welcomed by almost all teachers and students of American Indian literature.

This volume will be especially welcome to readers not already familiar with American Indian literature. Fiction is generally more "accessible" to readers than modern poetry and puts non-Indian readers more directly in touch with American Indian experiences. *Earth Power Coming* supplants, at long last, the Viking *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*, a much more limited anthology which featured almost exclusively stories by Southwestern writers. This new collection is far more comprehensive. It has twice as many stories—40 of them—and five times as many authors—30 of them.

No reader will like every story in *Earth Power Coming*. Indeed, not every reader will agree that every piece included should be called "fiction." There is wonderful variety here, wonderful richness. There is adventure, love, autobiography, philosophy, humor and biting satire. There are drunks, sluts, wife-beaters, soldiers, fishermen, romantics, cynics, lovers, neurotics and killers. There are young, middle-aged and ancient characters. There are reservation, urban and wild settings. This book has it all, and teachers will revel in the choices they now have at their disposal as they seek to flesh out their semester syllabi.

With such plenty and variety there is little that these stories *have in common except that they were written by American Indian writers and deal with American Indian characters*. Some are mere wisps, barely a page long. Others are substantial and moving stories that cut close to the bone of experience. Different readers will find here different answers to the question: What themes are most characteristic of American Indian fiction? I will not attempt to answer the question here. I will suggest, however, that this book provides the best mine for fictional themes we have yet seen between two covers.

I will also suggest that of the various common themes I noticed, one stands out: the theme of homelessness. We find many homeless American Indians in this volume. There is the chambermaid in a motel who finds herself, by the end of the story, fired. There is the drunkard hobo in another story who dies from exposure in a hobo shanty. There is the old fisherman who returns to his home after struggling with a huge snapping turtle, only to find that his woman's daughter has had her mother committed to a "home" and has thus banished him from the only home he has known for 40 years. There is the boy—apparently retarded—who is forcibly kidnapped by a social worker and carried off to another kind of "home." There is the man who loses his job and his home by the lake and is forced to move with his wife and children to the city. There is the cynical American Indian tourist who claims Europe for his people. There is the soldier who, even though he is not a Christian, is made a chaplain's assistant. There is the man who returns to his childhood home only to find it condemned and about to be torn down. There is the old Cheyenne who, with his son and grandson, makes a final pilgrimage to the Texas mountain he had once called home, only to find that he

has to get permission from the White owner before he can climb it. In several of these stories we find an obvious anger at the White people who have taken the homeland from the American Indians, but the feeling in most of these stories is more than that. It is a feeling of lostness, of despair, of alienation that rises far above White-Indian politics and that speaks to an almost universal separation from place that too many Americans, of all races, feel.

If there is a solution to the homelessness evoked in so many of these stories, it is the solution of the earth. Simon Ortiz takes the title of his book—as I take the title of this article—from D'Arcy McNickle's *Wind from an Enemy Sky*: "It was the time of pleasure, to be riding in the early morning air, to feel the drumming earth come upward through the pony's legs and enter his own flesh. Yes, the earth power coming into him as he moved over it." When American Indian writers speak of the power that can come into us from the earth, they describe a source of power for all men and women, a way to touch the home which is common in us all.