

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing. Edited by Simon Ortiz.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7s57g74n>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 22(3)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Stromberg, Ernest

**Publication Date**

1998-06-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

other group studied soil samples to identify human remains after decay—Keeley, et al., "Trade Element Content In Human Bone in Various States of Preservation," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 4 [1977]:19-24. Keeley's group was successful in discovering the "silhouette" of a fifth-century Saxon burial in Essex, England.) Sloan soils had zinc present at 13.4 parts per million (ppm) and 6.8 ppm for copper. In human bone, zinc is present at 160 ppm and copper at 10 ppm. The soil analysis indicated that there were areas of much higher concentrations of zinc, and these were in areas where there were artifact clusters and/or bone fragments. Unfortunately, the site has been completely destroyed through conversion from cotton to rice production. Had there been more time to excavate the site or it was more or less intact today, more definitive soil analysis could strengthen the contention that Sloan is a cemetery site. Researchers could use cluster statistical analysis to guide the collection of additional soil samples that would provide more definitive answers.

While one may wish for less circumstantial evidence, it appears probable that Sloan was a cemetery site. The report is well worth reading for anyone interested in Paleoindian/Arctic periods. Particularly good is chapter nine which provides an excellent review of the Dalton period and the place the Sloan site holds in our understanding of Paleoindian and Southeastern archeology.

G. Edward Evans  
*Loyola Marymount University*

**Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing.** Edited by Simon Ortiz. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 228 pages. \$16.95 paper.

Both established and somewhat less well-known contemporary Native American writers gather under the rubric of writers on writing in this collection of autobiographical essays edited by Acoma Pueblo writer Simon Ortiz. The book consists of nine essays, not including Ortiz's own introductory piece. As a forum for Native writers to share personal stories and discuss the role of the writer and writing in Native America, it belongs as a companion piece to the 1987 collection *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, edited by Brian Swann and

Arnold Krupat. Like the earlier collection, *Speaking for the Generations* is not a collection of "academic" essays. Rather, these essays will provide readers with insights into the personal histories and creative visions of individual writers and into the shared concerns of cultural responsibility, relationship with the land, and the need for justice that unite these artists as indigenous authors.

The collection achieves a fine balance as established authors Leslie Marmon Silko, Gloria Bird, and Roberta J. Hill are joined by younger or emerging writers Esther G. Belin (Diné), Allison A. Hedge Coke (Tsalagi/Huron), and Warm Spring's Elizabeth Woody. And, in recognition of the non-indigenous nature of national borders, the inclusion of First Nation writers Jeannette Armstrong and Daniel David Moses and Mayan author Victor D. Montejo further textures the mix.

Indeed, it is this intergenerational and international aspect that lifts this anthology into a unique position among collections of Native writing. With writing as a common subject, these essays illuminate the writers' shared negotiations with language, a history of colonization and attendant losses, and how these issues converge to influence individual and cultural identity. At the same time, each piece of this mosaic throws into relief the distinctions between generations, nationalities, and cultures. While all the writers document an intimate awareness of the effects of colonization which reveal shared sensibilities that transcend individual experiences, the perspectives and the responses are far from homogeneous.

In fact, it is the heterogeneity of the pieces that leads to my one note of caution. The collection is subtitled, *Native Writers on Writing*. But do not let this title lead you to anticipate expositions on literary craft or focused articulations of literary aesthetics. In reality, few of the essays center on writing alone. Most of these essays are autobiographical stories with the discussions of writing developing indirectly as features of the teller's story. Rather than focusing on writing as a craft or discrete activity, the discussions of writing come embedded within discussions of the role of storytelling and its significance in transmitting culture. For example, Esther Belin writes, "My path has been blessed with stories. . . . my writing will always focus on our struggles, my memory, what I witness . . . and stories overheard in bar talk" (p. 71); A.A. Hedge Coke asserts, "I come from a long line of storytellers" (p. 116); or Victor D. Montejo, who states, "I . . . decided to write stories and legends that were fading from the oral tradition. . . . in order to secure a place for

ourselves in the modern world" (p. 201).

Few of these essays directly pursue the question of what it means to be a writer or how they developed a literary aesthetic. Rather, the treatment of the role of writing emerges from discussions of responsibility to culture and ways of articulating a relationship to the land. There are no art for art's sake manifestos here. In the eyes of these authors, writing clearly serves a social purpose. As a locus of reference, Leslie Silko's comments are applicable to all of the essays in this collection: "The . . . people and the land and the stories are inseparable" ("Introduction," *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, p. 14). Each of these essays reveals the connections among cultural identity, the living world, and the writer's words.

The social and political dimensions of these connections are perhaps most clearly expressed by Spokane author Gloria Bird in her essay "Breaking the Silence: Writing as Witness." Bird asserts that everything, including writing, "is inherently political" (p. 28). She argues that autobiographical writing, writing that bears "witness to colonization" can serve in the struggle to decolonize the mind by identifying "those instances in which we internalized what we are taught about ourselves in schools and in history books" (pp. 29-30). To illustrate this point, she shares stories of her family, their internal conflicts, and her research into the effects of open-pit uranium mines on the Spokane Reservation.

In one form or another, each writer indicates the political necessity of writing as a means of resistance and an expression of cultural survival. Oneida poet Roberta Hill sees Native writing as a means to challenge the ways Indian people have been defined by others. For her, writing is a part of the creative cultural pulse: "If we don't create, our cultures do not live" (p. 78). Like Bird, Hill sees writing as a means to engage in struggle with the forces that have shaped Native Americans' conceptions of themselves: "Images we create . . . will either edge us toward despair . . . or guide us to the recovery of ourselves and the living earth" (p. 91). For Mayan writer Victor D. Montejo, the sense of urgency is particularly acute. Writing from and about a situation in Guatemala in which Mayan people have been under government-sponsored assault into the present day, Montejo sees writing as a means to bring "some consciousness to the American population on behalf of Mayan people. . . one that can have a positive influence in changing the conditions of violence that Mayans have endured for centuries" (p. 216). For all of these authors, writing is

about survival.

Interwoven with the shared concerns of self-definition and the survival of culture; nearly all of these writers dwell significantly on the human relationship and responsibility to the land. As Elizabeth Woody says of the Warm Springs people, "At the time of Creation, the creator placed us on this land and gave us the voice of this land, and that is our law" (p. 166). In Woody's essay, we hear the words of a poet charged to speak against abuses to the land and to assert the interdependence of all people with the health of the land. And, as the essays by Leslie Silko, Esther G. Belin, and Jeannette C. Armstrong attest, this law was not given only to the Warm Springs people. Silko's essay, "Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories," originally published in her own 1996 collection of essays, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, articulates a Pueblo aesthetic that reinforces the connections between people and the natural world.

The most focused discussion of the relationship between the writer, her language, and the land occurs in Jeannette C. Armstrong's "Land Speaking." Armstrong asserts that the Okanagan language, its syntax, its shades of meaning, its rhythms, "constitutes the most significant influence" on her writing in English. And this language has evolved its unique characteristics in relationship with the land. According to her Okanagan ancestors, "language was given by the land" (p. 175). She extends this idea by indicating how Okanagan and English differ in significant ways, ways which influence her worldview and her writing (p. 187). Her essay provides a valuable discussion of the differences between Okanagan and English and how she must struggle to convey the nuances of Okanagan concepts in English. Unfortunately, her otherwise excellent essay is somewhat marred by a rather superficial denigration of English for its lack of musicality and rigidity. While in the mouths of some speakers or in the hands of some writers, English certainly lacks music, this lack, as a cursory glance at the history of poetry in English will attest, is not an inherent feature of the language.

Nevertheless, both Armstrong's essay, and A.A. Hedge Coke's "Seeds" provide important discussions of what Coke calls the "Indianizing" of English. Coke explains how Native Americans "reclaim what we can by Indianizing even simple English words. . . . This is part of survival and adaptation" (pp. 107-8). And Armstrong discusses how "Okanagan Rez English has a structural quality syntactically" close to that of the Okanagan language (p. 193). Both Coke and Armstrong's

discussions of indigenous adaptations of the English language suggest the dynamic process of living cultures surviving assimilation efforts, making the language their own, and, in Armstrong's words, "constructing new ways to circumvent . . . [an] invasive imperialism upon my tongue" (p. 194).

Engaging and engaged, this collection makes a powerful contribution to a rich yet critically neglected dimension of Native American cultural expression, the personal essay. From at least the published works of William Apess in the 1820s through the essays of Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Bonnin) and Charles Eastman to such recent collections as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner* or Janet Campbell Hale's *Bloodlines*, the personal essay has been a powerful vehicle for Native American voices. *Speaking for the Generations* continues this important tradition. As works of literature, the essays in Ortiz's collection stand on their own. As voices raised in resistance to ongoing efforts to subordinate Native Americans, these essays present a unified front. And for scholars of Native American literature, these essays provide vital insights from the literary makers themselves.

Ernest Stromberg  
James Madison University, Virginia

**The Ute Indians of Colorado in the Twentieth Century.** By Richard K. Young. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. 362 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

*The Ute Indians of Colorado* attempts to recount the impact of modernity on the Native peoples of Colorado and surrounding areas. In meticulous historical style, Richard K. Young illustrates how geographic location, economics, and especially politics (both internal and external) work to affect the ebb and flow of sociocultural dynamics. Young's contribution is twofold. First, he lends support to a thesis of many other scholars of American Indian Studies: that the sociocultural systems which many anthropologists tend to treat as being discrete (e.g., politics, economics, religion, and the like) are intertwined in the Utes' understanding of the world and one's place in it. Second, he illustrates how two separate Ute communities have responded to the forces of shifting federal and state Indian policies manifest in the twentieth century (implicitly suggesting they have done so with con-