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Review of The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon

Charles G. Ballard
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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The task, then, is to become more sensitive to and more knowledgeable about the one or more voices that are often found in literary offerings. In 1966 the important investigator of this phenomenon was the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who wrote in that year “The Structural Study of Myth.” But Krupat makes abundantly clear that modern examples can also be found in the work of an interesting quartet—Leslie Silko, N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, and James Welch—as well as in the collections and updating volumes by such writers and scholars as Joseph Bruchac, Duane Niatum, Howard Norman, Dennis Tedlock, Dell Hymes, Barre Toelken, the author himself, and a host of Native American poets.

The key term, Krupat suggests, is cosmopolitanism. It is the “projection of heterodoxy not to the level of the universal, but, rather, to the level of the ‘international.’” The Third World, after all, is becoming a significant category. In the future, then, a “cosmopolitan polyvocal polity” will be an ideal that can absorb, blanket, and authenticate marginal varieties of prose and poetry as well as define the central thrust of modern literature.

But is this ideal of the future realistic, or is it merely wishful thinking? Perhaps it is some of each. What cannot be overlooked, however, is the haughty judgment that has often been given by the formalist critic, namely that in the New World our culture “has not been accumulating long enough to be thick on the ground.” An amazing statement! Indeed, the voice in the margin, as Krupat suggests, needs to be heard, if only to say how long it has been around, if only to offer greetings to a newcomer on the scene.

CHARLES G. BALLARD
English and Ethnic Studies
University of Nebraska-Lincoln