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BOOK REVIEWS

The Native American Oral Tradition: Voices of the Spirit and Soul. By Lois J. Einhorn. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000. Illustrations, notes, further reading, index. xx + 163 pp. \$55.00.

This excellent, albeit imperfect, book re-examines indigenous North American oral traditions as alternatives to mainstream Western discourses. Neither a literary anthology of Native myths nor an oral history of storytellers, it treats these traditions as persuasive messages addressed to audiences. Einhorn, rhetoric professor at Binghamton University, combines “transtextual” analysis of metaphor and symbol with “contextual” considerations of time, place, and cultural assumptions in an ambitious study of indigenous rhetoric spanning myriad speakers, nations, regions, and periods.

Chapter 1 contrasts the “dominant male discourse found throughout Western civilization,” employing oppositional argument, a detached attitude, and “hard” evidence—reflecting a scientific, mechanistic world view of control—with indigenous discourses, employing circular themes and organization, passive voice, and movement (verbs) over classification (nouns), reflecting a holistic, relational world view of cooperation. Chapter 2 contends that Natives employ distinctive imagery and “archetypal” metaphors of light, water, family, disease and cure, and nature for unique ends; no mere figure of speech, metaphor is creative energy that breathes life into the world.

Subsequent chapters examine specific modes of discourse, emphasizing differences between Native and Western rhetoric derived from this basic dichotomy. Chapter 3, “Speeches of Peace and Protest,” examines

Native deliberative oratory, which seeks “dialogue, conversation, and negotiation” rather than conversion. Chapter 4 contrasts creation myths and other parables with Euro-American “bedtime” stories and television narratives, distinguishing the former’s “rapport talk” from the latter’s “report talk.” Chapter 5 treats ritual songs and prayers, emphasizing differences between Judeo-Christian religion and Native spirituality. Chapter 6 concludes that Native traditions expand persuasion’s scope beyond Aristotle’s sender-receiver model based on probable proofs, and beyond Burke’s model of identification among social beings who are inherently divided, to processes of “achieving oneness with the self and everything in the cosmos.”

Works of this scope risk oversimplification and invite carping. Disclaimers and qualifiers don’t entirely dispel uneasiness at generalizations that Natives employ inclusive “and” terms while Euro-Americans employ bipolar “but” terms, or that Euro-American narratives feature “competition, domination, individualism, and beauty.” While Einhorn engages some Western and Native scholars, one wonders about a discussion of binary oppositions that ignores Derrida, or a treatment of orality that overlooks Ong. Einhorn’s subject position, which relies on universalist claims that everyone experiences the “same emotions” and “could have been born as the other,” to authorize her speaking in behalf of Native traditions is problematic. Nonetheless, real kernels of insight, even wisdom, await the reader with a generous spirit.

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