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

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The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon. By Arnold Krupat. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. Introduction, works cited, index. 259 pp. \$30.00 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

Readers will find this heady mixture of post-modernist ideas and qualifications, Indianist viewpoints, and generous helpings of Native American material quite enjoyable and informative. Perhaps in this scholarly book the hors d'oeuvres, or the first several chapters, are formidable enough to drop the reader to his or her knees, but the effort required is indeed worthwhile.

Polyphony and otherness are distinctive terms that offer, Krupat points out, "good advice" rather than a "theory." The good advice, that is, speaks out against imperial domination and, therefore, questions "the West's claim legitimately to speak for all the Rest." For instance, the Native American voice is present and has always been a cultural and literary force, yet it is hardly recognized as such. Why is this so? The author suggests that the labels *culture* and *literature*, as stated by Western critics, have retained a formalist characteristic. The tendency has been to evaluate everything in terms of dominant forms that originally came from Europe.

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.

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