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1991

## Review of Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse of Native American Indian Literatures

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Shanley, Kathryn, "Review of Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse of Native American Indian Literatures" (1991). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 630.

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*Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse of Native American Indian Literatures*. Edited by Gerald Vizenor. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989. Preface, notes, contributors' notes, index. xiii + 223 pp. \$29.95.

Back about eight or ten years ago, when Punk hit the American youth scene, there was a joke floating around. It went something like this: How did the dead baby get across the road? [Answer: Safety-pinned to the chicken.] Of course, in order to "get" the joke, you have to understand the Punk mentality and be able to recall instantly the joke that (as far as I can tell) has floated around children's playgrounds for the past several decades: Why did the chicken cross the road? [Answer: To get to the other side.] For Punks, the philosophically probing "why" is displaced by the methodologically curious "how" in the conjugation of humor over time and as history moves even more steadfastly toward the absurd.

As a graduate student trying to make sense

of critical theory in relation to my study of literature and, more specifically, my interests in Native American literature—rooted primarily in historical re-vision and resistance to ideological domination—I found the joke particularly appealing at that time. What it suggested to me was that alternative world views—inasmuch as authors hope to “enable” them to enter mainstream academic discourse—must ride “safety-pinned” to the “chickens” of critical tradition. And (at the risk of taking a pun too far) they remain epistemologically “dead” in their own right. So, on to the “why” and “how” of *Narrative Chance*, and a different question: Can or should Indian literatures cross the road?

When Gerald Vizenor identifies “narrative chance” as (at least some of) the stuff comprising both tribal narratives and postmodern discourse, and when he designates trickster as “a comic trope, chance in a narrative wisp, tribal discourse and an irreversible innovation in literature,” he is talking walking politics. It’s a politics opposed to academic constructions of “Indianness” and an argument for opening texts, if not minds, for and to multiple readings. The “chance” is both a way out of what Vizenor terms “hypertragedies” and “hypotragedies” (terms which variously describe much academic knowledge of who Indians are, have been, and can be) and an opportunity for a sort of “free play” of discursive possibilities. Postmodern discourse thus allows a re-visioning of tribal history, an undoing of the “social science monologues,” which have created “absolute fakes” and passed them off as tribal cultures, according to Vizenor. I do not take issue with Vizenor’s position, as presented in his “A Postmodern Introduction” to the text, and in the last chapter, “Trickster Discourse: Comic Hologropes and Language Games,” since what he seems to be up to is providing an outrageously decentering invitation to play—talking walking trickster stuff.

The contradiction or paradox (depending on how you look at it) in the play of positions within the text and intertextually lies in the definition of terms like “center” and “communal.” For as Vizenor notes via Rollo May,

“Creativity occurs in an act of encounter,” wrote Rollo May . . . “and is to be understood with this encounter as its center.” The trickster is an encounter in narrative voices, a communal sign and creative encounter in a discourse.

In whose “community” (as the term “communal” implies) does this “creative discourse” take place? Does a shared language alone constitute shared “space”? To believe Native American texts share in contemporary critical literary discourse seems naive or optimistic to me, the excellence of the essays in the anthology notwithstanding. On the other hand, perhaps a text like *Narrative Chance* can create the possibility for encounters between Native American literatures and the grande dame of theory.

Without exception, the essays in the collection offer intriguing, new readings of well-known fictional works by N. Scott Momaday, Leslie M. Silko, Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, James Welch, and D’Arcy McNickle. Viewed through the lens of contemporary critical theory—Lacan, Bakhtin, Derrida, et al.—the critics (Karl Kroeber, Kimberly Blaeser, Arnold Krupat, Gretchen Ronnow, James Ruppert, Robert Silberman, Alan Velie, Louis Owens, and Elaine Jahner) challenge the reader to see these works as creatively eluding “old” ways of seeing Native American literature. But Elaine Jahner, in her “Meta-languages,” the most intellectually and stimulatingly self-conscious piece in the collection, explains the difficulties involved in applying postmodern, deconstructive theory to Native American literature, when she writes:

Translating what they [Indians of centuries past] sensed into terms that might communicate interculturally was impossible because such translation requires knowledge of two ways of knowing, but beyond that it requires that the issue itself make sense to the people to whom it is being addressed. Until the twentieth century, few European intellectuals radically questioned their own epistemological foundations.

Given Jahner's optimistic sense of the twentieth-century intellectual climate, perhaps "two ways of knowing" are possible, not to mention desirable. But to my mind, something gets lost between the "dead babies" or penises that lustily and foolishly stretch across the prairie to obtain the objects of their desires—that is, between the truly trickster view of the world—and what we tamely see through the eyes of contemporary theory. Nevertheless, give the book a chance. I did, and I didn't regret it.

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