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## **Review of *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition* By Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez**

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*Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition*. By Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999. Notes, bibliography, index. x + 259 pp. \$40.00 cloth, 19.95 paper.

Brill de Ramírez's work addresses at least two crucial issues that scholars of Native American literatures must consider every time they read: what cultural contexts are informing the texts, and what critical approaches to these contexts and texts will not perpetuate academic or intellectual colonialism. In *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts* (1993), Greg Sarris explains that in addition to a careful consideration of American Indian cultural and historical contexts, a reader must also consider the history of her or his own readings. *Slug Woman*, an important precursor to Brill de Ramírez's study, proposes that we practice critical inquiry as a conversation with rather than an imposition on American Indian literatures. Scholarship, then, is the storytelling of that conversation.

The primary critical premise of *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition* is that in order to avoid the critical distortion and attendant domination of American Indian texts, readers must acknowledge

the influence of oral traditions and world views that articulate a human interconnectedness to the rest of creation. To affirm this interconnectedness, Brill de Ramírez explains, these literatures demand a “conversive” rather than a “discursive” scholarly approach. By seeking similarities and connections between human and non-human persons, and textual and contextual worlds, the conversive is transforming in a spiritual sense, whereas the discursive divides and categorizes and, therefore, frequently destroys.

Brill de Ramírez devotes the major portion of her work to defining and establishing the contrasts between discursive and conversive practices, the latter of which are influenced as much by Ludwig Wittgenstein as by American Indian storytellers and readings of the works of such authors as Momaday, Silko, and Luci Tapahonso. Though Sherman Alexie’s name figures prominently on the cover with Momaday, Silko, and Tapahonso, a reader interested in a longer discussion of how orality informs his work is likely to be disappointed. On the other hand, the space allotted to Alexie is part of a thoughtful chapter on Louis Owens, Lee Maracle, and Alexie that helps establish a conversation among storytellers who find themselves in conflict in other textual worlds.

In the Epilogue, Brill de Ramírez discusses James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood* and the absence, rather than the presence, of conversive relations between the protagonist and the world. This particular discussion illustrates the extent to which Brill de Ramírez would like us to practice the critical approach she proposes. Orality influences all written literatures, she explains, and conversivity facilitates an “intersubjective” relationship to the world that also indicates the presence of the “sacred.” To practice conversive scholarship, she suggests, is to repudiate the objectification of peoples, texts, and contexts.

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