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Review of *Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry, 1890~ 1999* By Kenneth Lincoln

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Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry, 1890-1999. By Kenneth Lincoln. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. Selected bibliography, index. xxvi + 435 pp. \$22.50 paper.

In the *North American Review* for 1815, Walter Channing suggested that America could compensate for its lack of a literary heritage distinct from Europe by attending to the "oral literature of its aborigines." Though probably not the first to propose this idea, Channing was among the earliest to call upon writers in the United States to found an indigenous belletristic tradition upon Native American models. The call has been periodically taken up by commentators on American literature ever since; William Gilmore Simms,

Mary Austin, and now Kenneth Lincoln have all found the roots of a truly *American* literature in American Indian verbal art.

Lincoln finds the common element in a range of American poets, extending chronologically from Emily Dickinson to Carolyn Forché and including both Euro-American and Native American examples, in the Lakota phrase that translates as “sing with the heart of a bear”—which means, he writes, “to connect with the native within, the oldest kinship of human, nature, and language” in order to tap the spiritually “cleansing north wind.” This mystical view of what poets do focuses Lincoln’s treatments of several Euro-American writers: Sylvia Plath, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Theodore Roethke, and Sharon Olds, for example. He also deals with representatives of the “Native American renaissance” (which Lincoln had named in an earlier book): contemporary American Indian writers, among them N. Scott Momaday and James Welch, who have Great Plains roots.

Lincoln’s essays on these writers are observant and fun to read, but they also occasion some irritations. For one thing, the concept of “singing with a bear’s heart” is too fuzzy to provide a totally meaningful handle on all these writers, and it sometimes seems strained in its applications. The connections to the Lakota concept are not always clear, and in fact—following Mary Austin—Lincoln seems to perceive rhythm as the major way in which his examples relate to an indigenous poetic esthetic. Lincoln also tends to do what amounts to name-dropping by briefly referring to or quoting from contemporary intellectual celebrities, often without clear documentation of sources. I’m also disturbed by his uncritical acceptance of the pronouncements of some of his predecessors, particularly Austin, whose ideas about Native American verbal art derived from suspect data—translations in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources colored by Victorian and Modernist impositions.

Like Lincoln’s other books, though, *Sing with the Heart of a Bear* is essential reading for

anyone interested in contemporary American Indian writing. It’s also an interesting contribution to the ways in which American literature might be located within an indigenous heritage. The reader will encounter plenty of insights to enhance an appreciation of modern American poetry but should also expect some frustrations.

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