KENNETH M. ROEMER

Introduction

I

In 1969 Vine Deloria, Jr.'s (Yankton-Standing Rock Sioux) *Custer Died for Your Sins* appeared. In 2001 W. S. Penn (Nez Perce / Osage) published *Feathering Custer*. Both are witty books by talented Native American writers. Juxtaposing them suggests the rapid development of the study of American Indian literatures. One of Penn's targets is the academic literary critic, while Deloria aims at anthropologists. Why the difference? One obvious explanation is that an invisible target is hard to hit. In 1969 academics specializing in Native literatures were practically non-existent. Anthropologists (along with folklorists and historians) controlled academic Indian country. Today anthropologists, folklorists, and historians still occupy much of the territory. But the dramatic increase in the visibility of Native American literatures has inspired the growth of a substantial body of criticism worthy of recognition, praise, and, as Penn demonstrates, at times, ridicule. Since 1969 in libraries, in classrooms, and on the Internet the study of American Indian literatures has progressed from invisible to marginal to expected status.

The recognition of literature written in English by American Indians (the focus of this volume) was long overdue. The Mohegan minister Samson Occom published a best-selling sermon in 1772, which he followed in 1774 with a collection of hymns, thus initiating the significant tradition of collecting and writing hymns in English and tribal languages. Novels, poetry, essays, and autobiographies written by Native Americans have appeared since the early nineteenth century; John Joseph Mathews's (Osage) *Wah'Kon-Tah* (1932) was a Book of the Month Club selection; Will Roger's (Cherokee) syndicated *New York Times* columns and "correspondence" for *The Saturday Evening Post* reached millions of readers – despite these and many other "facts" of Native American literary production and recognition, writing by American Indians was rarely included in university literature courses before the 1970s.

This disciplinary barrier to teaching Native American texts as literature collapsed during the 1970s and 1980s. Broad social and academic movements – Civil Rights and Ethnic Studies, in particular, but also feminism and Women's Studies – combined with specific literary events help to explain the change. 1969 witnessed two of the events: the previously mentioned publication of Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins*; and the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction to an unknown Kiowa author, N. Scott Momaday, for his first novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1968). The 1970s witnessed the appearance of a popular paperback reprint of the collaborative life narrative *Black Elk Speaks* (1972); the establishment of Harper & Row's Native American Publishing Program (1971), which published Simon Ortiz's (Acoma) *Going for the Rain* (1976); Reynolds Price's front-page *New York Times Book Review* rave review of James Welch's (Blackfeet / Gros Ventre) *Winter in the Blood* (1974); the publication of Gerald Vizenor's (Anishinaabe) *Bearheart* (1978, 1990); and the acclaim accorded to Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna) for *Ceremony* (1977). The numbers of American Indian authors grew dramatically during the 1980s and 1990s. Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Ojibwe) has an international reputation and has won major awards, including a National Book Critics Circle Award for *Love Medicine* (1984, 1993). Other Native American novelists, poets, playwrights, and essayists including Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna / Sioux), Michael Dorris (Modoc), Joy Harjo (Muscogee / Cherokee), Linda Hogan (Chickasaw), Greg Sarris (Coast Miwok / Pomo), Diane Glancy (Cherokee), and Sherman Alexie (Spokane / Coeur d'Alene) achieved national reputations and, in Alexie's case, even celebrity status.

The increased visibility of writing by Native American authors inspired the types of scholarly, institutional, and publishing support necessary to foster and sustain the growth of a new field. As the "Further Reading" section of this volume indicates, bibliographies and reference works began to appear in the 1970s. By the 1990s reference books on American Indian literatures were plentiful. The benchmark work was A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff's *American Indian Literatures* (1990), followed by Andrew Wiget's *Handbook of Native American Literature* (1994, 1996) (which was preceded in 1985 by Wiget's survey *Native American Literature*), Janet Witalec's *Native North American Literature* (1994), my *Native American Writers of the United States* (1997), Kathy J. Whitson's encyclopedia *Native American Literatures* (1999), and Suzanne Eversten Lundquist's *Native American Literatures* (2004). Important recent specialized reference works include Dorothea M. Susag's *Roots and Branches* (1998) for high school teachers; Bruce A. Goebel's *Reading Native American Literature: a Teacher's* Guide (2004) and Eric Cheyfitz's *The Columbia History of Native American Literature since 1945*

(2005). The bibliographies, handbooks, and encyclopedias are grandly complemented by the online and hard-copy Native American Press Archives directed by Daniel Littlefield (Cherokee) at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

Reference works and archives made visible the existence of the literature and scholarship; anthologies facilitated the texts' entry into the classroom. Collections of English translations of songs, ceremonial chants, prayers, and narratives date back into the nineteenth century. Since the awarding of the Pulitzer to Momaday, there has been a marked increase of anthologies devoted to writing composed in English, beginning with modest collections published by regional presses, for example, John Milton's *The American Indian Speaks* (1969) and culminating in the late twentieth century and opening the twenty-first with sophisticated, multi-genre anthologies, for example, Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird's (Spokane) *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* (1997) and John L. Purdy and James Ruppert's *Nothing But the Truth* (2001).

Critics and scholars need testing grounds and outlets for their ideas; they need sessions, conferences, journals, and publishing programs. Since the early 1970s the Modern Language Association and an affiliated organization, the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures, have fostered national discussions at MLA conventions. The early meetings culminated in a 1977 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar in Flagstaff, Arizona; the MLA's most recent recognition of the field came in a Lifetime Achievement Award (2002), a tribute to one of the field's founders A. LaVonne Ruoff. Now there are other organizations supporting the field, including the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, and other gatherings, including the Native American Literature Symposiums. Critical debates are encouraged by specialized journals – especially *Studies in American Indian Literatures* and the new journal *Indigenous Journeys*, but also by *American Indian Quarterly*, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, and *Wicazo-sa*. Even the widely distributed newspaper *Indian Country Today,* routinely includes discussion of contemporary Native authors in their "Lifeways" section. Today the best-known authors frequently publish with prestigious commercial companies like HarperCollins, Norton, and St. Martin's. Other novelists, poets, and scholars find support from several university presses, notably the University of Nebraska, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Arizona, and UCLA.

From ignored to required, from dry bed to mainstream – the rise of American Indian literature deserves much attention and praise while also inviting some perplexing and even troubling questions. What exactly is Native American or American Indian or Indigenous literature? My multi-labeled statement of that

question obviously raises another: what should we call this literature? Also, are there characteristics that distinguish the literature? In this introduction I will only be skimming the surfaces of the many possible responses to these questions. I hope my comments will, nevertheless, encourage teachers and students to place their study of particular texts within the contexts of these questions.

II

When addressing the question, "What is Native American literature?," two words come to mind: immensity and diversity. It is appropriate that the most important reference work (Ruoff's *American Indian Literatures*) and the one journal exclusively devoted to Native literary studies (*Studies in American Indian Literatures*) both add an "s" to literature, as I will in this introduction when referring to the body of written and oral literatures. The oral literatures certainly deserve the plural form. Before the arrival of Columbus, there were thousands of narratives, ceremonies, songs, and speeches performed by experts trained in performance and interpretation. Each of these traditionally used categories can, of course, be subdivided into numerous related forms. For example, creation, trickster, hero, and animal stories for narratives. In *Native American Literature,* Wiget offers a useful way to differentiate between various ceremonial performances by discussing the relative emphases on the individual, the tribe, and healing and renewing of the world. Songs can encompass almost every aspect of human life. The Navajo celebrate their culture heroes Monster Slayer and Child of Water in song; they also sing of weeding. As useful as these genre categories can be, they mask another type of diversity. Anyone who has studied a particular narrative, speech, song, or ceremony knows that the genre boundaries are quite porous. For instance, the Navajo Nightway, an elaborate nine-day ceremony, does indeed focus on the healing of one (or a small number of) individual(s). But the words of the prayers extend *hózhó* (beauty, order, happiness, harmony) far beyond individuals to encompass Navajo old men and old women, young men and young women, boys and girls, and children and chiefs, as well as many colors of corn. Furthermore, certain songs sung during the Nightway can also be sung "separately" outside of the ceremonial context.

Cultural and regional variety multiplies the genre diversity. Conservative estimates place cultural counts at more than three hundred cultural groups and more than two hundred languages in North America when Columbus arrived.[1] And this was (and still is) a dynamic cultural diversity. Even if we limit our view to cultures within the boundaries of the United States, evidence of extensive trade routes, which often extended far beyond those boundaries,

suggest that more was traded than "goods." The prevalence of hero twins in the Southwest, the flood episodes and recurring emergence of earth diver motifs in creation narratives, and numerous other parallels demonstrate the vibrant borrowing and reinventions that went on for hundreds, even thousands, of years. Of course, this dynamism continued after the arrival of Europeans. In one famous late nineteenth-century account of inventive borrowing, Frank Hamilton Cushing collected an imaginative blending of a traditional Zuni story about a girl tending her flock of turkeys and the Cinderella story.[2]

The diversity of Native oral literatures encompasses more than a cataloguing of the diversity of cultures, languages, and region; the diversity of genres (which can include tribal genres quite different from Euro-American typologies), and the dynamics of cross fertilizations. The diversity also includes how the literatures are experienced. For most students, encountering Native oral literatures means reading paragraphs in standard English or reading what look like poems. These are limited and misleading encounters. Not only do they often hide the central role of mediation by translators, editors, and publishers, they hide the tremendous diversity of written and performance forms used over the past five centuries to represent oral literatures. Spanish priests and French Jesuits offered some of the first versions, preceded, of course, by Mayan non-alphabetical forms of inscription. As tribal languages took modern written form (Cherokee was an early example), there were written versions in tribal languages. In the nineteenth-century Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and other "collectors" of oral literatures often offered three versions of a text: a representation in the tribal language, a literal translation, and a more literary translation. In the twentieth century collections such as Dennis Tedlock's *Finding the Center* (1972) and Larry Evers and Felipe S. Molina's (Yaqui) *Yaqui Deer Songs* (1987) offered sophisticated combinations of bilingual representations framed by linguistic and cultural contexts.

Even if we limit our view to English translations there is a tremendous variety. For example, for narrative texts, translations range from Franz Boas's huge blocks of prose punctuated by pause lines and parenthetical numbers indicating five-line units, to Anthony Mattina's attempts to use "Red English" representations to capture the grammar and diction of his English-speaking storytellers, to Dell Hymes and Tedlock's use of narrative verse forms and typography to represent dynamics. If we move beyond the "reading" experience to audio tapes, videotape series (such as Larry Evers's *Words and Place: Native Literature from the American Southwest*), and live performances – all of which can vary with the skills and personality of the performer and the composition of the audience – the diversity of experiencing American Indian oral literatures is truly immense. Thus the decision to limit our focus to literature written in English.

Nevertheless, at the outset of the volume it is important to acknowledge the grand importance of the performed literatures as a major (possibly The Major) part of Native American literatures. This acknowledgment will be continued throughout the volume, often explicitly as in discussions of oral narratives by Joy Porter, translation mediations by David Murray, and collaborative life narratives by Hertha Sweet Wong, as well as implicitly in the examinations of the influence of storytelling traditions in works by many of the authors and in the mention of the numerous echoes and reinventions of family and community voices that appear in the essays, fictions, plays, and poems.

III

There is no need to survey the different written genres in English here, since the contributors to Part 2 provide overviews of genres and genre mixing. I do, however, want to highlight a problem that tends to obscure the extent of the immensity and diversity of Native American literature written in English. Anyone who has read Ruoff's *American Indian Literatures* or Helen Jaskoski's *Early Native American Writing* (1996), or visited Littlefield's Native American Press Archives knows that for more than two hundred years Indian authors have written many forms of non-fiction prose, as well as fiction, poetry, and, more recently, drama. One literary event and a powerful academic prejudice tend to obscure that diversity. The event was the awarding of the Pulitzer for *House Made of Dawn;* the prejudice was and still is a privileging of fiction and poetry over drama and non-fiction prose. The predilection for fiction and poetry (and to some degree autobiography) combined with the focus on contemporary novels inspired by Momaday's Pulitzer tends to obscure the importance of the non-fiction, drama, and pre-1968 literature.

This is unfortunate because, as indicated in several essays in this volume, the less privileged genres and the earlier literature can offer so much to students of American literature and culture. In essays, bibliographies, and books, several scholars – in particular Jack Forbes (Renape / Lenape), Robert Warrior (Osage), Daniel Littlefield, Vine Deloria, Chadwick Allen, Joanna Brooks, and Maureen Konkle – have emphasized the significance of the non-fiction prose, including the sermons, treaty / council documents, political essays and speeches, humor, intellectual / academic writing, histories, and journalism outlined in Bernd Peyer's essay. For instance, Allen argues convincingly in *Blood Narrative* (2003) that non-fiction, especially treaties, have helped to shape rhetorical and narrative strategies in the fiction and poetry. Furthermore, in terms of word count and number of readers (especially

Indian readers) non-fiction genres are the most significant forms of Native American writing. Therefore, students hoping to gain insights on key issues such as tribal sovereignty and how this concept translates on national, tribal, and local levels would be wise to consult Littlefield's Native American Press Archives, as well as newspapers such as *Indian Country Today,* the *Navajo Times,* and local newsletters. A paper like *Indian Country Today* also introduces students to some talented and provocative writers, especially in the "Perspectives" section; for example, Suzan Shown Harjo (Muscogee / Cherokee) has contributed lively articles on the harmful effects of words such as "plight," "roamed," and "squaw" (for example see the 28 February and 4 July 2000 issues).

Audiences for drama and pre-1968 poetry and fiction certainly cannot rival the size of readership of the popular non-fiction. An acquaintance with both is, nevertheless, essential to a knowledge of Native American literature. Early twentieth-century plays like Lynn Riggs's (Cherokee) *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931) and *Cherokee Night* (1936) deserve attention in their own right. The former is especially interesting because of its transformation into the popular musical *Oklahoma!* in 1943 and all the implied issues about musical adaptations and the appeal of the West, the range, and small towns. Drama is significant, moreover, because, as Ann Haugo's essay demonstrates, it is one of the fastest growing "new" genres for Indian writers and because of its connections to an even "newer" genre – film, most notably seen in the national distribution and video and DVD availability of *Smoke Signals*, *The Fast Runner*, and *Skins*, but also in less widely distributed films like *Naturally Native* and the video versions of Spiderwoman Theater productions.

D'Arcy McNickle's (Métis Cree / Salish) *The Surrounded* (1936) is an obvious example of a pre-1968 novel worthy of study "on its own" as a sophisticated psychological study of a mixed-blood protagonist, Archilde Leon, surrounded by conflicting Salish, Old World Catholic, and "new" American cultures. Together the early novels also remind us that long before *House Made of Dawn*, *Ceremony*, and *Love Medicine*, Native American authors were exploring complex mixed-blood identity issues in *Surrounded,* Mourning Dove's (Colville / Nicola / Okanogan) *Cogewea* (1927), John Joseph Mathews's *Sundown* (1934), and John Milton Mathews's (Cherokee) *Brothers Three* (1935); and examining the controversial issue of the role of women in S. Alice Callahan's (Muscogee) *Wynema* (1891) and *Cogewea*.

Furthermore, the pre-1968 writing forces us to consider basic questions about content and perspective. Consider two mid-nineteenth-century authors, Betsey Guppy Chamberlain (Algonkin) and John Rollin Ridge (Cherokee). Does Chamberlain bring a particular "Indian" viewpoint to her essays on working conditions in New England Mills? Should Ridge's *The Life*

and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta (1854) be part of Native American literature despite its focus on a legendary Mexican bandit? Louis Owens' (Cherokee / Choctaw) responds positively to the latter question. He sees the novel as "a disguised act of appropriation" that is as much about the oppression of Indians as it is about a romantic Mexican figure?[3] Similar "Indian content" questions might be applied to many later works and settings by American Indian authors – the distinctly white Oklahoma landscape of Riggs' *Green Grow the Lilacs,*[4] Momaday's poems about Russia, and the Moscow and Tokyo worlds of Martin Cruz Smith's (Senecu del Sur / Yaqui) *Gorky Park* (1981) and *December 6* (2002). Is it forcing the issue to define such works as Indian literature, or is excluding them from this rubric as narrow-minded as "wishing Joseph Conrad had written [only] 'Polish' novels."[5] This type of question, implied 150 years ago by Ridge's novel, should remind us that it is best to avoid overly rigid notions of appropriate "content" for Indian literature. "About Indians" should be defined flexibly enough to include the huge diversity of the topic and the possibility of appropriation of seemingly non-Indian subjects by Native viewpoints. Most important, it is crucial to examine each author within the contexts of his or her cultural and physical environment and his or her development as a reader and writer.

Several of the early novels also demonstrate that long before the mixed-genre creations of Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), Ortiz's *Fight Back* (1980), Silko's *Storyteller* (1981), Joy Harjo's *Secrets from the Center of the World* (1989), Diane Glancy's *Claiming Breath* (1992), and, more recently, Anita Endrezze's (Yaqui) *Throwing Fire at the Sun, Water at the Moon* (2000) and Carter Revard's (Osage) *Winning the Dust Bowl* (2001), American Indian novelists were pushing genre boundaries. One of the most interesting examples is Ella Deloria's (Yankton Nakota) *Waterlily,* which was completed in the 1940s but not published until 1988. Deloria considered herself a translator, linguist, and ethnographer, but she felt that her academic form of writing limited her audience and forced her to suppress her personal viewpoints. With the encouragement of the famous anthropologists Franz Boas and especially Ruth Benedict, she attempted to harness the form of historical fiction in the service of spreading ethnographic information about kinship and social relations of the Tetons (Lakotas). At times the result can be a contrived narrative that creates "ethnographic opportunities" – the death of a beloved grandmother is a ready-made opportunity to educate the reader about Ghost Keeping rituals and customs. But the overall effect is a convincing undercutting of stereotypes about "primitive hunting and gathering" societies. The networks of interpersonal relations represented are just as, if not more, complex than the workings of family and community groups in European and mainstream American societies.

IV

It is certainly accurate to speak of the immensity and diversity of the many forms of spoken, sung, and performed literatures and of the many forms of written texts, including more than two hundred years of writing in English. But when it is necessary to converse with colleagues and students and to give titles to courses, articles, and books, relying on "Immense and Diverse Literature" will be viewed with much suspicion. Unfortunately, there is no entirely satisfactory answer to the naming question. The typical labels – American Indian literature, Native American literature, native literature, Indigenous literature, Amerindian literature – all pose ethical and descriptive problems because they impose European concepts and language that are inaccurate and transform diversity into a vague generic essentialist category that can be used to marginalize or misrepresent a diversified people and a complex intercultural history. "American" evokes the name of the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, and it can be applied to North and South continents, whereas the term is typically misused to mean only the United States. As Gerald Vizenor often reminds readers, "Indian" reflects Columbus's confused sense of geography (unless one believes that *Indios* derives from Columbus's positive response to the Taino people – *una genta in Dios,* a people in God).[6] "Native" could apply to anyone born in the United States, though capitalizing the "N" may suggest the primacy of the first "natives." "Native," indigenous, and Amerindian risk negative connotations of stereotypical notions of the "primitive," and the latter two terms risk the dehumanizing connotations of social science jargon.

There have been many praiseworthy attempts to find alternative labels. In 1972 in the national periodical *Akwesasne Notes,* Jack Forbes recommended replacing the colonizers' names with several possible Native names, including the Algonquian words *Anishinabe-weli* (the equivalent of Indian country), though he admitted the problem of using one language group name when there were so many tribes.[7] Another possibility would be to use the term "First Nations," since it would emphasize the historical primacy of the peoples and the concept of sovereignty, which is so important today. Through usage, First Nations has, however, become almost exclusively associated with Canadian tribes. In *The Voice in the Margin* (1989), Arnold Krupat offers five interrelated definitions reflecting the diversity of the literature: "Indian" literature (a "local literature"), the "ongoing oral performances of Native people"; "indigenous" literature, involving interactions between Indian and Euro-American literary forms; "ethnic" literature, created by minority populations not historically indigenous to the United States; "national" literature, the sum of Indian, indigenous,

ethnic, and Euro-American literatures; and "cosmopolitan" literature, the intersections of the national literatures.[8]

Three decades of dialogue about the naming issue have not produced consensus among literary scholars and academic publishers. Even this volume bears witness to the disagreement: the editors inclined toward American Indian literature, the publisher toward Native American literature. There is rising consensus in favor of American Indian among reservation Indians, newspaper editors, and many contemporary authors, who have taken a misnomer and re-inscribed it to represent a source of pan-tribal unity and pride. Negative responses to Native American, the most frequently used alternative to American Indian, can range from gentle humor about grant seekers cultivating politically correct language to hostility from Alaskans, Hawaiians, sovereignty activist groups, and those with strong tribal roots. On the other hand there are substantial numbers of urban and suburban Indians and academics, critics, and publishers who prefer Native American and, like one of the first Native autobiographers, William Apess (Pequot), find great offence in the term Indian. In *Manifest Manners* (1994) and other writings, Vizenor presents "Indian" as an irreparably tainted term that must be challenged by "postindian warriors" who in new stories create terms of survival and vitality. [9] Of course, the complexity of the naming issue is highlighted by Vizenor's use of "indian" as the root of his re-invented term.

Because of this complexity and because there is no consensus, the editors of this volume have not imposed naming guidelines on the contributors, hence the variety of terminology in the essays. In this introduction, I have used American Indian and Native American interchangeably, though, as noted earlier, when referring to the totality of oral and written texts, I have used the plural literatures; when referring only to texts written in English, I have used the singular literature.

As unsettling as it is, a workable approach to the naming question (there is no "best" approach) is to use American Indian or Native American literature(s) when referring to the immense and diverse bodies of oral and written texts, but to be more precise about the historical, cultural, and generic contexts when referring to specific texts. Defining Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* as a novel informed by Kiowa storytelling, Navajo ceremonialism, Jemez Pueblo landscapes and social/spiritual values, Modernist (especially Faulknerian) concepts of the novel, Emily Dickinson's and Yvor Winter's concept of the lyric, and rural and urban post WW II socio-economics, may seem rather long-winded compared to calling the novel Native American literature. But the multi-layered naming helps us to understand how an author like Momaday creates a vibrant literature from many sources. Stressing the multiplicity by using multiple naming – whether it be for a