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# Trails of Triumph, Trails of Tears

By Rick Plant

THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN TODAY, a special issue of THE PHOENIX literary journal. Division of Arts and Letters, Northeastern Oklahoma State University, Vol. VI, Nos. 1 and 2, 1985. 112 pages, \$5.00 (\$9.50 for annual subscription).



Illustration by Pat Kolb

In her essay "Grandmother Spider's Sacred Web," Anne C. Bromley traces the literary history of Grandmother Spider, who as the great cosmic weaver of webs is perhaps the highest creative deity in Native American mythology. Grandmother Spider is enjoying a recent surge of popularity, Bromley tells us, surfacing as a major symbol in many recent works by Native American writers. The poets' identification with Grandmother Spider seems a natural one: "Poets, like spiders, spin strong lines. They too are interested in maintaining vital connections." Just as the poet and the spider weave, creating a natural-seeming mesh of form and function, so must editors do a kind of weaving in creating an anthology of writings, particularly when that anthology is devoted to a single theme. THE PHOENIX, the literary journal published with the support of the Division of Arts and Letters at Northeastern Oklahoma State University, has devoted this issue to the theme "The Native American Today." Taken as a whole, the issue catches its Native American theme quite successfully in a web that is coherent and strong. As an added delight, individual pieces--strands of the web--frequently glisten with imagination and style.

The editor, Joan Shaddox Isom, proudly notes in her preface that the fifty contributors in this issue of THE PHOENIX "hail from as far away as Japan, Alaska, California, and . . . New York and Vermont." Along with this diversity of demographics, the contributors show an amazing diversity of background and reputation, as they range from NEOSU undergraduates to renowned poet and Library of Congress consultant William Stafford. And overall, the younger, less practiced writers compare quite favorably with the professionals.

Who is the Native American today? In poetry, fiction, essays, and interviews portraying--and frequently written by--Native Americans, THE PHOENIX offers a variety of responses. As one might expect, some of these pieces portray the Native American poignantly, a displaced person yearning for a lost past, probably part real and part romance. In the poem "Koyaanisqatsi" (translated as "life out of balance"), the narrative persona, a Hopi Indian, mourns the decline of his culture into a mere tourist curiosity: "Pueblos pulse with tourists who shout/In our sacred rooms, spit in ancient kivas/Go away empty." Once, the poet continues, life consisted of three lines: the land, the eye vision, and the sky.

We dwelt between those lines,  
For all things came of them  
And we Hopi knew it.  
Now, our spirit world Four Corners  
is scattered, Koyaanisqatsi.

The forced dispersal of Navajo and Hopi Indians is the subject also of "Eminent Domain," a three-part poem by Vivian Mary Carroll. In the unsympathetic voice of an Arizona bureaucrat, the poet ironically asks, "How can a mountain be saved? This is 1985."

Yet in the most powerful of these poems, the poet doesn't mourn in the disembodied voice of an entire tribe or culture; instead, he or she speaks in an individual voice of the daily, personal miseries of living. And the voices one hears most distinctly in this collection are feminine. In "The Visit," a simple but heartbreaking poem, Kathryn Follis Cheatham describes an Indian woman's visit to her husband in jail:

Between our mouths is a grid so dense  
a whisper won't weave through.  
I tuck in my sorrow and feel  
Brown eyes on my leaving  
catching memories in my walk,  
clinging to my presence.

In "Christmas Day Part II," Mary Ann Gerard-Hameline paints in concrete detail a nightmarish Christmas of Poverty, drunkenness, and domestic violence. The same poet, in "Flying," has a battered, beaten woman contemplate a leap from a speeding car:

Did I have on clean underwear?  
Would the uniformed men  
who have seen it all on this  
narrow road  
think that I broke my nose  
while flopping raggedy Mary Ann  
down the pavement?  
Would they know that I was already dead  
When I jumped out?


And finally, in "Woolworth's," poet Charlotte DeClue describes an Indian girl's humiliation and outrage when the manager of a Woolworth's accuses her of shoplifting, mistaking her for "another dark hair/bobbing down aisles of chantilly/and palette rouge."

Despite the obvious pain and injustice conveyed in these poems, I found a pent-up strength which helps to make the misery tolerable, raising these poems far beyond the easy wail of self-pity or pathos. The girl in Woolworth's, too young and timid perhaps to make a scene, nevertheless confesses, "My tongue sharpened at the edges/wanting to cut his dry heart in half." And even the woman in the car, silently suffering a broken nose and broken fingers, gains not only our empathy, but also a kind of power through her strength of imagination. Unknown to the car's grim, abusive driver, this woman passenger asserts her psychological independence by silently scheming, imagining her own suicide in gruesome detail. And if such an exercising of imagination is a desperate form of escape, it seems to serve also as a source of strength, even of superiority (the woman's driver cannot imagine, presumably; he can only hit). A number of these poems--the best, I think, in the journal--obviously transcend the Native American theme, portraying human miseries and strengths that are universal.

Many writers in this collection have a good time teasing common clichés about the Native American. A recent NEOSU graduate, Joni L. Imotchey, pursues this theme in a sincere and charming essay, "The Age of Consent," which recounts one Indian girl's eventual coming to terms with her Native American heritage. Her futile attempts to "be Indian" in the ways that others expect her to be, are whimsical and instructive. Humor also infuses the fiction of Joseph Bruchac III and William Borden. In Borden's short story, "Joining the People Tribe," an enthusiastic, socially conscious young man named "Jim" approaches an Indian in a bar and begs the older man to instruct him how to "become" Indian. Bruchac's "The Code Talkers," an excerpt from a novel-in-progress, describes how two Native American soldiers resourcefully--even gleefully--survive the North African desert of World War II, deceiving not only the Germans, but also their own allied commanders.

How successful have been attempts to assimilate Native Americans into the melting pot of American culture? Are such attempts right-headed or travesties of cultural freedom? There's no ready answer, of course, and individual pieces in THE PHOENIX approach these issues with various degrees of seriousness. In "Righteous Son," a Cherokee mother observes her oldest, judgmental boy "mutate into a Fundamentalist." And in "Uncle Coyote, the Tourist" (which could serve as an interesting companion piece to "Koyaanisqatsi"), Uncle Coyote disguises himself "in Converse high tops, Bermudas, white t-shirt and 'shaka' Aloha shirt," carrying his "new 35 mm camera-free from TIME MAGAZINE," to tour a pueblo which, the poem implies, he already knows quite well. Is Uncle Coyote outraged by the carnival atmosphere? Saddened by a lifestyle lost? No, he "ends up playing bingo at Acoma."

Surely even the strongest, most symmetrical spider web suffers a flawed strand or two, and there are a couple of weaknesses here (the journal has no Table of Contents, an omission which may frustrate several readers. Also, one prose piece buried in the center of the magazine ["Reaction Paper to Conference on Indian Education"] suffers from the vague and self-important jargon which frequently dulls the pen of writers in the social sciences. I suspect this Reaction Paper will prove unreadable to all except a few of the "conferrees" themselves).

But these flaws are minor. THE AMERICAN INDIAN TODAY issue of THE PHOENIX is on the whole a very successful weaving together of various perspectives on the current state of Native Americans, both as a group and as individuals, making some "vital connections" that delight the casual reader and enlighten the curious one. 

*NOTE: THE PHOENIX invites submissions. Poetry, fiction, and essays will be considered--prose under 4,000 words, poetry under 30 lines. Submissions and subscription requests should be sent to:*

*Editor Joan S. Isom*

*THE PHOENIX*

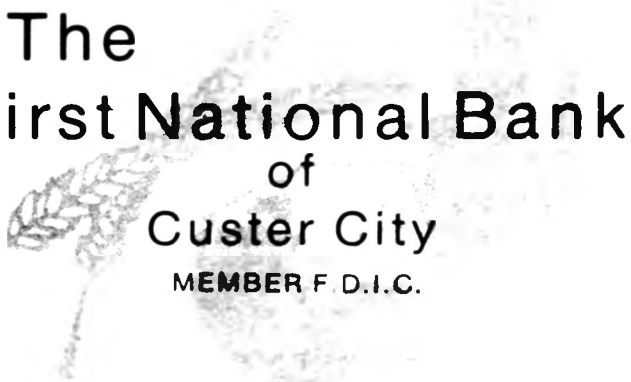
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