



## Review: Review Essay: Relationality and American Indian Literature

Reviewed Work(s):

*Contemporary American Indian Literatures & The Oral Tradition* by Susan Berry Brill de Ramierez

*The Heart Is a Drum: Continuance and Resistance in Contemporary American Indian Poetry* by Robin Riley Fast

*American Indian Literature and the Southwest: Contexts and Dispositions* by Eric Gary Anderson

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## **Review Essay: Relationality and American Indian Literature**

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**Contemporary American Indian Literatures & The Oral Tradition.** Susan Berry Brill de Ramierez. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1999. x + 259 pages. \$40 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

**The Heart is a Drum: Continuance and Resistance in Contemporary American Indian Poetry.** Robin Riley Fast. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999. xii + 251 pages. \$42.50 cloth.

**American Indian Literature and the Southwest: Contexts and Dispositions.** Eric Gary Anderson. Austin: U of Texas P, 1999. xii + 225 pages. \$35 cloth; \$17.95 paper.

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Theories. Texts. Territories. For the past twenty years, most interpretations of American Indian literature have arisen out of these three provenances. Theories of reading, such as postcolonialism, identity, the oral tradition, postmodernism, relationality, and cultural recovery have served as major modes of inquiry for both Native and non-Native critics who try to make sense of American Indian literary texts. Equally important are those readings that foreground the texts themselves. In the case of American Indian literature, text-based approaches accentuate the work of writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, D'Arcy McNickle, Simon Ortiz, Louise Erdrich, James Welch, and Gerald Vizenor over a particular theory or idea. And, as one might surmise from the opening trinity of terms, still another group of scholars root their analysis of texts, whether they be myths, songs, poems, or prose, in the land that is fundamentally central to the works under consideration. Where a theory or a writer might take center stage in one of the previous approaches, in a territory-based reading, heal-

ing or recuperative or symbolic properties of culturally specific geographical locations get the spotlight.

None of these strategies is any more important than another, and it is impossible to conceive of American Indian literary criticism without each, as all three modes of reading contribute to understanding the complexity of Native discourses. Such is the case with three new books on American Indian Literature. Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez's *Contemporary American Indian Literatures & The Oral Tradition* takes as its controlling metaphor Brill de Ramirez's intriguing theory of "conversivity." Focusing her attention solely on poetry, Robin Riley Fast maps in a series of close readings how various Native writers use poetry as a means of social and political engagement. In his study, Eric Gary Anderson moves from flying saucers to comic strips to novels to photographs in an attempt to chart the seemingly unchartable region of the Southwest. Taken as a whole, these three works not only function as metonyms for American Indian literary criticism in general, but they also serve as provocative Janus-faced texts: they look backward to the history of Native American resistance and survival and ahead to the promising future of American Indian literary endeavors.

Though the books take their departure from different places, a common directionality guides all three studies, in that each one emphasizes the importance of interaction, interchange, and exchange. For Brill de Ramirez, Fast, and Anderson, Native American literary studies must hinge on acts of relationality. It is not enough to recognize that American Indian literature itself is relational; analysis of such work must be as well. For scholars entering into these texts from such different locations, it may seem improbable or even unwieldy to find relation and exchange at the heart of all three books. But notice the similarities in the passages taken from the introductory chapters:

The storyteller and listener interact throughout the process in a conversation that reflects the inherent interrelatedness of storytelling. . . . I use the term *conversive* to describe the conjunctive reality of traditional storytelling through both its transformational and regenerative power (conversion) and the intersubjective relationality between the storyteller and listener (conversation). (Brill de Ramirez 6-7).

Contemporary Native poetry is generically and distinctively dialogic . . . . A contemporary poet, then, who writes in relation to a Native oral tradition, even tenuously, inevitably participates in a dialogic project from the moment that a “speaking” voice identifies itself in any way. (Fast 13-14).

*American Indian Literature and the Southwest* assumes that the Southwest and its peoples, like other American regions and theirs, can and should be read relationally; here is one of the shifting places where metaphors and notions of travel, migration, and movement appear to be more helpful than metaphors of borders and boundaries.

(Anderson 8-9).

Despite the fact that all three authors begin their studies from very different places, they all merge through their shared interest in the relational power of dialogue. This is even the case for Fast and Anderson whose critical thematics are clearly at variance with each other. Fast focuses her readings of poetry around the topics of borders and boundaries, while Anderson’s two major leitmotifs explore travel and migration; still, both scholars frame their respective arguments around concepts of relation and interaction, common themes of most of the authors addressed in their books. Like Brill de Ramirez, Anderson and Fast seem to be following the admonition of Greg Sarris who calls for literary criticism to narrow the gap between criticism, literature, and culture by “mov[ing] closer to that which it studies” (*Keeping Slug Woman Alive*). The result, when successful, is a welcome bridging of the sometimes yawning abyss between writer and critic.

For her part, Brill de Ramirez tries to close this gap through her theory of conversivity, which she sees as a critical recreation of the dialogism intrinsic to Native oral traditions:

The term *conversive* conveys both senses of conversion and conversation in which literary scholarship becomes a transformative and intersubjective act of communication. Here, the scholar becomes a listener-reader of literary works . . . and in turn becomes a storyteller-guide to assist others in becoming listener-readers of those literary works, not only in the classroom but also in scholarship (1).

Indeed, for the remainder of the book, Brill de Ramirez acts as a remarkably informed tour guide, winding her way through a vari-

ety of Native fiction and poetry, never dallying on one author or text too long. In fact, most of the book is comparative in scope, enabling the author to further enhance her trope of relationality with which her excursion begins. Beginning with Ludwig Wittgenstein and semiotics, Brill de Ramirez stakes out what she sees as the emergence of conversive methodologies. Brill de Ramirez sees Wittgensteinian philosophy as a “guidepost” to moving beyond the boundaries of Western rationality and into the uncharted space of American Indian oral traditions. It is from this new space that Brill launches her readings of various headlining Native writers like N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Sherman Alexie, and James Welch and lesser known authors such as Luci Tapahonso, Lee Maracle, Nia Francisco, and Anna Lee Walters. It is particularly welcome to find readings of Tapahonso and Alexie in a book since critical responses to their work do not always reach a wide audience.

When Brill talks about the critic becoming a storyteller herself, it is not lip-service. Frequently, she interrupts her critical exegesis to discuss how certain aspects of her personal life have affected how she wrote her book. In a rather postmodern move, she even muses how her own writing style loosened up over the course of the book, so that by the time she gets to the final chapter, she feels as though she has shed a kind of hegemonic prose in favor of a more conversational tone that brings the reader into her book as opposed to deferring or hindering the reader. Whether these gestures work or not will, most likely, be a matter of personal taste; what remains intriguing about Brill’s decision to drop the mask of objectivity is the larger implications of merging criticism with autobiography.

Brill de Ramirez is at her best in her readings of Momaday and Welch and especially in her generous and well-researched introduction as she contextualizes conversivity among other theorizations of Native literature, explains the cultural dynamics that have shaped her conversive strategies, and discusses how she will apply these strategies to various texts. While her textual analyses are always illuminating, the occasional moment occurs when the reader wants more than an explanation of how a certain text reveals its conversive structure. But, this is the curse of scholarship. To stitch an entire book together with a single thread insures that everything

holds together, but there are always other threads, other lines that must get left in the drawer. Still, Brill's book will prove immanently valuable for those new to American Indian literary studies and those teaching Native poetry and fiction who want to emphasize the interactive and performative aspects of American Indian texts.

Hard as it is to believe, Fast's *The Heart is a Drum* is the first book-length study of contemporary American Indian poetry, and, as such, it bears the unenviable burden of having to do a great deal. For instance, what critical stance does one refute? What writers does one include? Leave out? How many themes is it possible to cover? How does Native poetry distinguish itself from Native fiction? What should the first book on recent Native poetry *do*? Because of such formal concerns and notable thematic ones, in many ways Fast's book stands in sharp contrast to that of Brill de Ramirez's. Where Brill de Ramirez's multi-genred approach is organized around a single theme, Fast examines several themes—language, borders and boundaries, place and displacement, the healing capacity of myths, dreams and visions, and storytelling—through a single genre. Additionally, much of Brill de Ramirez's study explores how American Indian writers engage in meaningful and cooperative interaction, where Fast's study begins by looking at the notion of "contested spaces and contending voices." For Fast, poetry is not simply a form of connection and celebration, it is frequently a means of resistance, a theme more in line with Anderson's notion of "resistance in motion." According to her, poetry, expression, dialogue are necessary mechanisms of survival and endurance.

Toward this end, Fast proposes a poetics of relationality grounded in ideas of dialogue and dialogism, concepts she borrows from Russian theorist M. M. Bakhtin. Bakhtin, ubiquitous in comparative literature PhD theses in the 80s and 90s, may seem an unlikely compass for American Indian poetry, but Fast does an impressive job of applying his theories to Native poetry, a gesture Bakhtin himself could have hardly imagined. According to Fast, Bakhtin "emphasizes the inherent conflicts and creative potential of living language." His belief in language's social, hence political, grounding is in accord with Indian writers' commitments to the struggle for survival" (9). Fast goes on to show how other scholars

of Native literature like Kimberly Blaeser, David Moore, Peter Hitchcock, and Gerald Vizenor either employ Bakhtinian theories or embody them. Thus, even though her book moves through different thematic territories, Fast stays on course through capable demonstrations of how American Indian writers address various culturally relevant themes through dialogic and heteroglossic poetic moments.

Each of Fast's chapters is engaging and impressive in scope. Most of the time, she strikes an effective balance between breadth and depth, not just explicating poems but contextualizing them among the larger community of Native poetry. The only real criticism that could be leveled at *The Heart as a Drum* is that the book covers the same themes as every other book on Native fiction, that the book does not really explore what Native poetry can do that prose cannot. In fact, my favorite part of Fast's study is the final chapter, entitled "Toward a Native Poetics of Contested Spaces." In this brief conclusion, Fast explores the interrelation between aesthetics and ethics in Native poetry, a rare moment indeed, as virtually no readers of Native poetry address issues of aesthetics or form. Here, Fast contends that poetry, with its roots in oral traditions, functions as both accusation and commemoration. Ultimately, one comes away from *The Heart as a Drum* with a heightened awareness of what poetic language can and must do: heal, liberate, survive.

Despite its title, Eric Anderson's *American Indian Literature and the Southwest: Contexts and Dispositions*, takes a sharp detour from Fast's and Brill de Ramirez's studies. Where Brill de Ramirez begins her study with a theory and Fast with a strong foundation of poetic texts, Anderson locates his book in a place: the Southwest. But, this is not the Southwest of Barbara Kingsolver or Tony Hillerman novels. Anderson's Southwest is an elusive, ever-changing site of migration, resistance, encounter, and travel. In fact, his book begins with the popular fascination surrounding the 1947 "crash" of an alien spaceship in Roswell, New Mexico. Anderson situates his study at this time and place so that he can "call attention to what this post-World War II myth of the alien both reveals and overlooks, exposing a multiplicity of migratory Euro-American and American Indian 'alien' identities" (1-2). His premise is to show how this region has been and remains to be in

flux, yet retains a sense of identity. To this end, he remains interested in how the

Southwest—to the extent that I can define it from multiple, shifting points of view *and* maintain that it coheres geographically, demographically, ideologically, or argumentatively *as* the Southwest—is a place where ‘alien’ forces (social, cultural, racial, colonial, nuclear, and otherwise have been set in motion toward, across, through, around, and away from each other for many centuries. (Anderson 4)

Anderson sees himself working against the grain here, arguing for a multiplicity of Southwests, each of which function fluidly but also in tension with each other.

Among his Southwests is the Southwest of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, Frank Norris’s *McTeague*, Mary Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain*, Sarah Winnemucca’s *Life Among the Piutes*, Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*, A. A. Carr’s *Eye Killers*, the outlaw Southwest of Geronimo and Billy the Kid, and George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* cartoon strip. Readers expecting a Native-centered exploration of Momaday, Silko, Simon Ortiz, Tapahonso, Paula Gunn Allen or some other Native writer associated with the Southwest will be caught off guard by Anderson’s eclectic and interdisciplinary approach. Since Anderson sees Euro-American and American Indian cultures “migrating *against* each other,” then, for him, no accurate reading of the Southwest can focus on Native cultures alone. Rather, it must take an historical and intertextual approach to the various ways both Anglos and Natives have conceived, represented, and engaged this hybrid region and culture we now think of as *the* Southwest. There is not space enough to explain how each of his texts fits into Anderson’s reading of the Southwest; however, Anderson offers convincing readings of how each of the texts under examination is itself migratory in that each moves in and out of the space of popular and/or academic American culture. Each is responsible for contributing some character trait to the current identity of the Southwest.

Identity is Anderson’s key concept. Through each text, bizarre as they may seem, he shows how notions of identity are both transitory and fixed. We can shake off or hide or forget some aspects of identity, but never all of them. All of Anderson’s chapters flesh out the various identities of the Southwest in surprising and re-



refreshing ways, though, naturally, some are more convincing than others. While I found the two chapters on *Krazy Kat* very well conceived, extremely well done, and fun to read, Anderson remains more convinced of its role in shaping attitudes about the Navajo and the Southwest than I am. On the other hand, I found his reading of photography in *Almanac of the Dead* and “Tom Outland’s Story” (“written by a dead man about a dead culture”) from *The Professor’s House* fascinating. Having said that, scholars and teachers who turn to *American Indian Literature and the Southwest* as a source for texts they are likely to teach or write about, will probably turn away disappointed. Because of its dearth of canonical American Indian texts, Anderson’s book may appear the least “useful” of the three. But its interdisciplinary approach, its blending of historical and contemporary issues, and its sheer wackiness makes it the most encompassing and inclusive of the books under review. For those who are interested in the Southwest as a contested space (to borrow from Fast) in both the geographical and cultural senses, then Anderson’s study is sure to please.

Overall, I was impressed not only by the quality of scholarship in these three books but also by the sensitivity and openness informing them. None of the three authors are Native, and, as such, none attempted to write from inside Native worldviews, nor did any of the critics portray Native texts or Natives as other or as the subaltern. It might seem odd to some readers that Brill de Ramirez and Fast apply the theories of white European males to discuss American Indian Literature, but both focus on the liberating power of language advanced by Wittgenstein and Bakhtin, gestures to which most Native writers would relate. In fact, contributing to the topos of relationality animating all the studies, is the sense of relating to a discourse outside that of the authors. All three had to enter into dialogue or engage in conversivity or migrate into and through American Indian literature and culture. Taken as a collective, these texts offer a comprehensive conception of the state of contemporary American Indian literary criticism from the perspective of three non-Native scholars (and a non-Native reviewer). No doubt, a Native critic or reviewer might perceive these texts differently; however, Natives and non-Natives have been able to execute and sustain a remarkable sense of collaboration regarding the teaching and critique of Native American texts. Like the writers under ex-

amination in the texts themselves, these three books take important steps toward ensuring that sense of collaboration, exchange, and relation will continue.

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