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Abstract

Native American literature, and Native American culture as a whole, has often been portrayed through the lens of a single story. It is assumed that Native American authors are all the same, and that their works are all the same as well. During the Native American Renaissance period, Native American authors wrote works that fought back against this idea. Their writings are diverse, and show a depth of culture that is often presumed to be nonexistent. Two authors, N. Scott Momaday and Elizabeth Cook- Lynn, demonstrate this diversity through their goals in writing, reasons for writing, and forms of writing. They have similar goals for their work, but they have different reasons for beginning to write. They both use many forms when constructing their work. Ultimately, the work of Native American Renaissance authors like Momaday and Cook- Lynn provides an answer to the single story.

Keywords

Native American Literature, Diversity, Native American Renaissance, American Literature

Disciplines

Creative Writing | Native American Studies | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Comments

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Diversity in Native American Literature

Diversity is an important aspect of life, and is something that is often overlooked. Diversity in cultures is becoming more and more common as people from different cultures live in the same country. The United States is often called the “melting pot,” but long before the start of the “melting pot” era, there was a great diversity of people living here, who, like diversity, are often overlooked. The indigenous people of America have lived here for centuries, and their culture is full of diversity. Throughout the many tribes, there are variations in traditions, culture, and people. Native American culture includes food, ways of life, like the types of dwellings or means of acquiring food, social practices, literature, and much more. One important aspect of Native American culture is literature. The time period starting in the 1950s is known as the Renaissance of Native American authors. During this time period, Native American authors began to write for themselves, about their people and cultural practices. Before that, any literature on Native American culture had mainly been written by white people, and was inaccurate to say the least. Several of the authors from the Native American Renaissance are interviewed in the film series *Native American Novelists Series*, and several of their works are included in the anthology *I Tell You Now*. The Native American authors from the Renaissance are diverse in various aspects of their writing. The authors N. Scott Momaday and Elizabeth

Cook- Lynn exemplify this diversity through their goals in writing, reasons for writing, and forms of writing.

Goals in Writing

To begin, N. Scott Momaday and Elizabeth Cook- Lynn seek to achieve similar goals through their writing. First, N. Scott Momaday, in his interview in the Native American Novelists Series, says that he seeks to “disturb” people with his writing (N. Scott Momaday Film). He says, “I don’t particularly want to write happy books. I would rather write books that moved people and disturbed them in some way, made them think” (N. Scott Momaday Film). He wants to stir people to action with his words. He does not, however, want to falsely portray reality as a fairytale. He wants to tell it like it is, however brutal it may be. Despite wanting to disturb people, he makes it clear that he is not a political writer. He says, “I don’t consider myself a spokesman, and particularly not a political spokesman” (N. Scott Momaday Film). He walks the line between wanting to influence people with his writing, and deliberately being overtly political in his writing. Momaday notes that he and other veteran Native American authors are often accused by younger writers of being too neutral in their writing. The younger writers believe that the older generation is “too conservative and conciliatory towards the white establishment” and “that they don’t use their fame as a platform to fight for American Indian goals” (N. Scott Momaday Film). Momaday is not swayed by these comments, and stands by his declaration to not be a political writer. He writes with different goals in mind. Overall, Momaday’s goals are to stir people to action, but not to be political.

Similarly, Elizabeth Cook- Lynn describes what it means to be a Native American author and poet, and what responsibilities she seeks to fulfill, in her work “You May Consider Speaking About Your Art...” in the anthology *I Tell You Now*. She starts by saying that it is irresponsible

for a Native American poet to assume that they speak on behalf of their entire people. If they do, they are being ignorant, and thinking too highly of themselves. Her point is that one person should not assume to understand the opinions of every other person. Rather, a poet should be humble, and only speak their own opinions. Second, she says that it is the responsibility of a poet to “consecrate history” (Cook- Lynn 59). This means that a poet should write about historical events in a way that people will be able to read and learn from, but it also includes adding in personal reflections on the event. She says, “Yet as a self- appointed poet I bring my own perceptions into this tribal event even as I am aware of the public nature of the event and the history that surrounds it” (59). Not only is a Native American poet recording history, but they are also weaving in their own opinions throughout the account. Finally, the third responsibility of a poet is to continue the legacy of their ancestors. A poet does this through their writing by including reverence to their ancestors, and by including traditional themes that represent important parts of Native American culture. This shows respect for elders, and provides a continuation of tradition and culture that is invaluable for younger generations. These are the three responsibilities that Elizabeth Cook- Lynn outlines, and she seeks to fulfill them in her writing. She strives to speak for herself first, but acknowledges that she is a Native American poet. She records historical events in her poems, while bringing in her own perceptions of the events, and she includes Native American themes and traditions that continue the legacy of her ancestors. In this way, these three responsibilities are the fundamental goals of Elizabeth Cook- Lynn’s work.

Reasons for Writing

Unlike their similar goals, Momaday and Cook- Lynn have distinct reasons for writing. Elizabeth Cook- Lynn, when she was younger, began writing out of a sense of rage. She grew

up seeing very little Native American literature, and inaccurate representations in what was published. She attended a college course that was supposed to be about Native Americans, but there was no mention of them in any of the books or course content. As soon as she learned to read, and saw this lack of representation, she yearned deeply to write. It was a deep anger that drove her to want to write. She says, “That anger is what started me writing. Writing, for me, then, is an act of defiance born of the need to survive. I am me. I exist. I am a Dakotah. I write” (Cook- Lynn 57). This quote summarizes her reasons for writing. She writes to give herself a voice. She says that having no representation makes one feel silenced, and writing is a tiny step towards having a voice that is heard by a larger audience of people. While she wanted to physically write, her culture wanted to “tell” (58). This “telling” did not necessarily come in the form of ink and paper. Rather, it came through many different mediums, encompassed in the oral tradition. She says, “It is this dichotomous nature of the real world and the literary world and, yes, the present world that accounts for the work I do” (58). These worlds combine in her writing, driving her purpose for putting pen to paper. Anger is what started her writing, and listening to the oral tradition provided the content and context for her work.

Contrary to Cook- Lynn, Momaday emphasizes different reasons for writing. He began writing as a young child, after watching his mother write at home. He notes that he followed in his mother’s footsteps before his father’s (N. Scott Momaday Film). Once he began writing, he felt compelled to continue. He has somewhat of a dual-natured reason for writing. Not only does he write out of a sense of conviction, but he also says that he purely loves the art of writing. He wants to write for the sake of writing. He describes these reasons by saying, “I write because I must, and I write out of my experience because it’s all I have. And I write with a fascination” (N. Scott Momaday Film). This quote gives insight into his content as well. He feels compelled

to write about his personal experiences as a Native American man, and to influence people with it. Although he does not want to be considered political, the fact that he feels compelled to write shows that he wants to influence people with his work. Momaday writes out of love for the art of writing, but also because he feels convicted to share his personal experiences with others.

Forms of Writing

Finally, Cook- Lynn and Momaday utilize multiple forms in their writing. N. Scott Momaday considers himself first and foremost a poet, but that is not the extent of his work. He has written novels, poems, songs, and prayers, but he is also deeply intrigued by masks and other forms of art. Any of these mediums can be expressive of Native American traditions and values. Momaday says, “Appearances are the things that inform the surfaces of the world, and we deal with them in our daily lives” (N. Scott Momaday Film). This is why he loves masks, and spends time analyzing and writing about them. One of the poems he reads during his interview is about a mask. In his work, Momaday mixes mediums to come closer to the Native American oral tradition. He says that he models his writing structure after the great “classics” of literature, which do not include works by Native American authors, because there were not any in the form that is considered “classic.” Rather, Native Americans used other forms of writing and expression than the “regular” method of pen and ink. While this is his structure, his content is imbued with Native American myths and legends, as well as his personal experiences. These elements contribute to his sophisticated writing style that transcends many different mediums. Momaday notes that poets do not make the amount of money that novelists do. They do not attract as much mainstream media attention, and people in the United States tend to not appreciate poetry near as much as novels. Despite this, Momaday says, “I think poetry is the highest form of expression, and I would rather be a poet than a novelist, say, or a journalist or

what have you” (N. Scott Momaday Film). His appreciation for all forms of literature is evident, but poetry is what he identifies with the most.

Like Momaday, Elizabeth Cook- Lynn also considers herself a poet. While she hesitantly accepts the label of “poet,” she strives to fulfill several responsibilities when writing her poetry. These drive her work, and they are evident when analyzing her poems. One of the poems she includes in her work in the anthology is “A Poet’s Lament: Concerning the Massacre of American Indians at Wounded Knee.” In it, she describes the horrific killing of Native American people at the hands of the United States cavalry. In the poem, she uses phrases like “Stars and Stripes” with irony to emphasize that it was the United States who committed this terrible crime against the Native Americans (Cook- Lynn 59). She describes the gory results of the massacre in detail, all while maintaining historical accuracy, but also by adding in personal thoughts of her own. She says, “The ceremony I describe in the second stanza really did occur, I’m told; the people and the warriors gathered within hours after the dreadful killing, and they swept into the grounds and guarded their dead, placing twelve red- draped markers at the perimeters of the site” (60). She uses themes like ceremony and journey in her writing, which are fundamental to Native American culture. By combining these elements within her poems, she fulfills the three responsibilities that she outlines in her work in the anthology. Her content and style provide the form of her poetry and other work.

The Renaissance period of Native American literature saw the emergence of many Native American authors who are quite diverse in several aspects of their writing. N. Scott Momaday and Elizabeth Cook- Lynn are examples of this, as they vary in their goals for writing, reasons for writing, and forms of writing. They are similar in some ways, and different in others. Momaday and Cook- Lynn both want to influence people with their writing, but they have

distinct reasons for beginning to write when they were children. The writing of authors such as Momaday and Cook- Lynn provides diverse views of Native American literature. Contrary to what people may believe, Native Americans are not all the same. They do not all write the same way, or about the same subjects. Just like other cultures, they have their own histories, traditions, and expressions. Native American authors have different styles, reasons for writing, content, and goals. This diversity is on full display in the work of the Renaissance writers. Ultimately, diversity such as that exhibited by Momaday and Cook- Lynn provides an answer to those who continue to believe that Native Americans can be defined by a single story.

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