

The Native American Renaissance: Its Prospect and Retrospect

Kaeko MOCHIZUKI

Ehime University

INTRODUCTION

The 1960s and 70s saw the early signs of a rebirth in Native American literature. This rebirth corresponds with the political awakening of the Native American peoples. Historians have noted, among the many incidents that encouraged the awakening, the capture of Alcatraz Island in 1969, the foundation of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1970, and the uprising in the Second Wounded Knee revolt in 1973. The awakened among the Native Americans all over the United States began to articulate the value of their history, culture, and existence itself in these political movements and, at the same time, started to create their own new literature in English, which was in many ways different from the previous translations of the old, ever rich folklore.

A decade after the Second Wounded Knee revolt of 1973 Kenneth Lincoln surveyed the literary rebirth in his book of criticism, *Native American Renaissance* (1983), from which the title of this essay is derived. In his book, Lincoln identifies N. Scott Momady's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) as representing the first peak of the ongoing renaissance.

Copyright © 1997 Kaeko Mochizuki. All rights reserved. This work may be used, with this notice included, for noncommercial purposes. No copies of this work may be distributed, electronically or otherwise, in whole or in part, without permission from the author.

sance. A second peak, as high as the first, is marked by Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). In 1985 Lincoln wrote a new preface for the paperback edition of his *Native American Renaissance* in which he discusses extensively Louise Erdrich's novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), valuing it as the third peak, as high as the first two, of the revival movement.

The purpose of this essay is to review the "renaissance" of the 60s, 70s, and 80s from a 1990s vantage point and to examine both how its issues have changed and in what ways they have remained unchanged. This essay also considers whether or not the renaissance has maintained its energy through the early 90s and predicts the possible direction it will take in the late 90s. The limitation of this essay is that it does not go into close examinations of each work, since the discussion covers almost three decades and eight pieces of fiction and poetry. It will offer, however, a bird's eye view of the direction the Native American Renaissance has taken and how each major work functions as a signpost.

On the basis of the themes the writers have chosen, the Native American Renaissance can be divided into three periods. The first period is the late 60s and the 70s, in which the writers dealt with such themes as (1) a hero's recovery of his ethnic identity by heroic, ritualistic death and (2) protest against a society based on white-male supremacy. The second period is the 80s, where the focus shifted to (3) the healing and survival of Native American peoples by women's power and wisdom and (4) rewriting the history and reweaving the stories of their own people. The third period is the 90s, where it has yet to be seen whether Native American writings are undergoing a decline of the Renaissance reflecting a general political backlash, or the continuance and maturity of the Renaissance in spite of the backlash.

Shortly after Lincoln's discussion of Erdrich's *Love Medicine* in 1985, Paula Gunn Allen's book of criticism, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in the American Indian Traditions* (1986) appeared. Allen reasserted in this book the value of women's power in Native American politics and artistic activities. Six years later Allen wrote a new preface for the 1992 edition of her book in which she surveyed the 80s and pointed out many events that had brought about the resurgence of Native American life and culture. She, too, connects these phenomena to a "Native American Renaissance."

These occurrences, along with a growing number of films, plays, dance performances, and scholarship devoted to themes of American Indian life and thought, constitute a mighty cultural flowering, a truly Native American Renaissance.¹

The Native American Renaissance thus prospered in the 80s. In an interview in 1985 Allen proudly counted 15 fine novels created by Native American professional writers all over the country from the Northeast to the Southwest.² In 1991 another important novel, Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, came out, signalling the fourth and, in my opinion, the highest peak since the 60s. The relevance of Allen's discussion in *The Sacred Hoop* was supported by this novel of Silko's. In 1992, only seven years after Allen's 1985 calculation, Louis Owens listed 50 novels in his book of criticism. Native American literature, published in English, obviously became more prolific than ever in the early 90s.

I. THE 60S AND THE 70S, THE FIRST PERIOD

N. Scott Momady, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko can be regarded as the three writers representing the 60s and 70s, the first period of the Renaissance. Momady's Pulitzer Prize novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1968), is an exemplary work that expresses the two themes characterizing the first period: (1) a hero's recovery of his ethnic identity by heroic, ritualistic death and (2) protest against a society based on white-male supremacy. The style of the novel flows as musically as traditional songs and chants, corresponding with the themes of belonging and pride.

The hero Abel (Yemez-Pueblo), deracinated from the old traditions of his people, witnesses the madness and violence of World War II. Having narrowly escaped being killed by a German tank, or "the machine coming"⁴ to him, he returns home to discover that even there he has no place where he can fit in and feel safe and comfortable.

The memory of the war tortures him, with the sound and shape of "the machine" incessantly revving in his mind. He has a hard time explaining his feelings of loss and estrangement, and becomes "dumb."

His mind turned on him again in the silence and the heat, and he could not hold still. He paced about in the rooms; the room were small and bare, and the walls were bare and clean and white.⁵

Abel, certainly, is one of many young war veterans who have come home to find themselves social misfits, tongue-tied and uneasy. But Abel's unstable mental condition is made to be seen as particularly his by Momady's modernist narrative style.

Momady gives no detailed descriptions of Abel's psyche itself. Rather, as the quotation above shows, the descriptions of his actions are integrated into the descriptions of the sensuous world surrounding him, for example of "the silence and the heat" of the Southwest and the "small and bare" rooms of the Pueblo reservation. Through Abel's actions and the projected objects and scenes Momady demonstrates Abel's oppression, or how he is choked by the "bare and clean and white" walls of the dominant culture that persists even in the poor cottages of his native land.

Abel's feelings of estrangement and uselessness also come from the conflicting love and hate he feels for the native people in his hometown who are only seemingly dominated by a Christian-oriented white culture.

They have assumed the names and gestures of their enemies, but have held on to their own, secret souls; and in this there is a resistance and overcoming, a long outwaiting.⁶

Abel, however, is unable to share his own resisting "secret soul" with his clansmen at this point. Seized by anger and anxieties, he hates the white-looking native man he regards as the incarnation of everything "evil." He kills this "albino" man, who mirrors the way in which he himself is torn between powerful white culture and his own native background. He flees to Los Angeles.

The big city does not save him from alienation but, instead, drives him into self-destructive fights and alcoholism. Neither friends nor lovers can help him. He comes back home again, battered and sick. Listening to his grandfather telling the old stories on his death bed, Abel for the first time understands the meaning of the traditional death ceremony and recovers a sense of continuity, belonging, and wholeness. He becomes the leader of the ceremony himself, ready and willing to die as a traditional brave hero. He endures fever and physical pains and runs into the house of boundless time and space of his people.

About a decade after Momady's *House Made of Dawn*, James Welch depicted the disintegration of a young Native American and his home in *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979). Unlike Momady's settings,

neither old legends nor mysterious chants appear in Welch's novel. But the setting of a lonely man in a bleak northern town conveys the dry pathos of the Native American reality. Also unlike Momady's heroes, Welch's hero Jim is tied to his hometown, full of the anger and frustrations of a half-breed: his mother is a Gros Ventre, and his father white.

Jim, an alcoholic but not unintelligent youth, cannot maintain relationships with other people, but withdraws into the solitude of a deracinated orphan. One day while hunting, he mistakes his native friend for a bear and shoots him dead. He does not try to explain the unintentional killing to the prejudiced town police but runs away up into a snowy mountain.

Loney thought it would be a bad year for the farmers if they didn't get more snow, and then he realized that he was thinking of a future that didn't concern him. He glanced up at the sky and it was turning from gray to light blue. They could come anytime, he thought.⁷

It is thus just before he is shot by the pursuing party that Jim gains a sympathetic relationship with the sublime nature he momentarily joins. No longer lonesome, he feels related to his ancestors who, he imagines, worshipped the mountain proudly and also to the farmers who now depend on the water from the mountain. Free from the autistic illness of anomy, powerlessness and self-indulgence at last, he chooses the time and place to die of his own will as his ancestral heroes once did.

Though Jim is not saved by the traditional power of vision quest that Abel and Set, Momady's heroes, acquire, he has much in common with them in that he performs a ceremony of death in which he paradoxically attains life. He follows the examples of the warriors who never feared death but instead were always ready to say: "It is a good day to die." Times have changed since the days of the old warriors, however, and contemporary society has for Jim been an arena in which there is little hope or possibility to win, or to fulfill his dreams, because of his difficult, mixed background. His desperately suicidal performances are the only way he can find to express his existence.

It would be appropriate here to compare "the renaissance" of Native American writers with that other renaissance of their African American forerunners, namely the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s. The political and cultural awakening of the Native American peoples owes much to the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance and, later, the encouragement of the civil rights movement of the 60s.

While Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison are the two most celebrated successors to the Harlem Renaissance, N. Scott Momady and James Welch can be regarded as the founders of the Native American Renaissance. There is in fact a parallel between the African American novels such as Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and the Native American novels such as Momady's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Welch's *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), both dealing with the themes of a hero's identity crisis and social protest. As for women writers, while her forerunners, Jessie Fauset and Zola Neale Hurston, wrote fine novels as early as the 1920s and 30s, Leslie Silko grew up on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico in the 40s and started to write poems, short stories, and novels in the 70s. *Ceremony*, novel and poetry combined, is one of her products of the 70s.

The hero in Silko's *Ceremony* is in contrast to the death-oriented heroes of Momady and Welch so far discussed. Tayo, the hero, chooses to live in peace in his native village. A motherless half-breed, Tayo joins World War II on "some nameless Pacific island"⁸ and comes back home mentally ill. He resembles both Momady's and Welch's heroes as he painfully seeks his identity as a Laguna-Pueblo young man in a poverty stricken homeland. Tayo survives, however, supported by the affection of the old men and healed by the wisdom of such medicine women as his grandmother, aunt, and lover. He finds a place where he can live in symbiosis with other creatures:

He would go back there now, where she had shown him the plant. He would gather the seeds for her and plant them with great care in places near sandy hills. The rainwater would seep down gently. . . . The plants would grow there like the story, strong and translucent as the stars.⁹

Paula Gunn Allen, born in New Mexico like Silko and one of the best critics of Silko's works, comments that Silko's uniquely gentle hero recovers from illness because he modestly learns how to become a good "woman" to liberate himself from death-oriented heroism or the cult of manliness.

She writes a novel [*Ceremony*] all about the feminization of a male. . . . Not that he's got to wear skirts and lipstick, but that he has to learn how to nurture, how to be a mother.¹⁰

Tayo's choice seems to suggest a way to a quieter life based on rais-

ing and caring for things and people instead of competing with, destroying, and killing them.

Ceremony was written in 1977, two years before Welch's *The Death of Jim Loney* with which it shares the themes of identity, social protest, and traditional ceremony. Already it shows, however, a turning point from the first period of Renaissance to the second period in which the healing and survival of Native American people are the main concerns of the writers. The turn to the women-centered, or "womanist" to borrow Alice Walker's term, themes was connected to an increase in women writers, and this trend had been also preceded by the "flowering" of African American women writers such as Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and Alice Walker to name only three.

II. THE 80S, THE SECOND PERIOD

In the 1985 edition of his *Native American Renaissance* Kenneth Lincoln discusses Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, published in 1984. He underscores the fact that at this time women writers like Erdrich are starting to write prolifically, correlating "feminist, nativist, and artistic commitments in a compelling rebirth."¹¹

Lincoln argues that the themes of *Love Medicine* are different from those in the first period, pointing out two aspects of her then newest novel. The first difference is that Erdrich does not particularly emphasize the characters' ethnic identity as having primary importance in their lives but treats her characters as ordinary Americans with only a modest degree of consciousness and knowledge of their history and background. In other words, Lincoln points out, "the expected Indians"¹² like Momaday's heroes are absent in her novel. The tragic, short-lived heroes are absent. So are the expected gender stereotypes such as strong male leaders and their mild, submissive wives, who serve and support them.

The second difference Lincoln points out is that Erdrich does not emphasize the traditional means, such as chants and dances, of recovering the characters' pride and autonomy.

Instead, [in *Love Medicine*] there are pickups and bars and nuns and crazed uncles and fierce aunts and small issues of how "Indi'n" kin are, or aren't; but bloodlines and traditions and the "old ways" are not the overriding concerns of these people. Daily survival precedes cultural purism.¹³

As a result, “old-style ethnography,”¹⁴ detailed, for example, in various initiation ceremonies in the novels of the 60s and 70s, is replaced by the descriptions of a new-style post-modern ethnography. The stress has shifted from “cultural purism” to multiculturalism, in which curing wounds and re-envisioning history are carried out not by brave heroes but by ordinary people, especially by women, who maintain their own strength and dignity.

The two aspects of *Love Medicine* that Lincoln points out can be clearly seen in the narrative scheme of the novel. There are six narrators besides one omniscient speaker, and each narrator tells her or his story of “daily survival” and, very often, of daily failure. Female characters are as powerful and eloquent as male characters, each recounting her own limited but unique experience, exchanging inaccurate information about their worlds, and acknowledging, nevertheless, a loose, love-network of their people. The narrators, as dispersed as they are, like unstable particles, do not pursue the linear course of heroic endeavor. They try, instead, to survive, knowing that their meager, fragile existence always on the verge of extinction has some meaning in this atomic, electronic age.

There are, of course, similarities between the characters Erdrich portrays and those created by other writers before and after Momaday. Firstly, the image of Native Americans as members of a diaspora relocated from their real home has persisted in many novels in the figures of those dislocated from their native towns or villages. In *Love Medicine* women as well as men run away from the reservation, their ghetto and home, and some of them come back, like Momaday’s heroes, to resume their communal identity. Secondly, the characters of *Love Medicine*, like many in the previous novels, reflect the significance of spirituality and the immortal soul, the core of Native American religion.

June, the Chippewa heroine of *Love Medicine*, dies in a blizzard on her way home, but her soul nonetheless does reach home to join her people. Her death and resurrection are described in the beginning of the novel.

The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home.¹⁵

The traditional Christian dogma of the Resurrection of the son of God on Easter Day is, thus ironically and even playfully, replaced by

the rebirth of a Native American woman, or a daughter of primeval goddesses, whose sexual, reproductive power as a lover and a mother has been abused and exploited in the new, white America alien to her. In other words when a woman who is a "heathen" in the eyes of the white invaders dies and revives, she ransoms and takes back to her people the original, "pagan" Easter ceremony of celebrating the rebirth and coming of spring.

The way in which June regains her identity in her homecoming and the way in which her dignity is restored in the memory of her beloved people, however, is quite different from the ways of the 60s and 70s. The irony of *Love Medicine* is that the transformation myth functions less naively and the lyric contact with nature is paralleled by formidable materialism. June, the heroine, is given the image of "water" which is freer to come home than human beings as Momaday's heroes become a dawn runner and a bear to join their ancestors. Her soul, however, is transformed, as the story proceeds, into a sport car, purchased by her son King, the elder of her two sons, with her life insurance money. She comes home for the second time at the end of the novel in the figure of a car.

So there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home.¹⁶

Bringing "her" home, therefore, means bringing home the sport car her younger son Lipsha has acquired from his violent half brother King as a memento of their mother, June. Here Lipsha turns his mother into an object, that is, the automobile he drives in his own homecoming to the reservation. He is not at all conscious of what he does; he only lovingly personifies or humanizes the car. The soul of proud June, nevertheless, is materialized into a car whose brand name is Firebird, a phoenix reborn to a new machine life.¹⁷ None of the novel's narrators is allowed to detect the irony in this, and the omniscient speaker does not comment on it either.

The text suggests that June's homecoming this time is a sophisticated copy of her Easter homecoming pictured in the very beginning of the novel. The text seems to suggest, through the death of a Native American woman, that a huge, fetish system of society has transformed women into automobiles, reexamining civilization from the viewpoint of women, from the position of the objectified. In an interview Erdrich, the author, calls this keen sense of grasping the system's illness and injustice the sense of "survival humor." It would be more appropriate to

call it "survival irony" since Erdrich herself confesses in the same interview that "[t]he humor is a little blacker and bleaker now."¹⁸

The history of the Native American peoples as the dislocated, raped, and almost exterminated is duplicated in the small story of June, born in the woods and maladjusted to life both inside and outside the reservation, who becomes a prostitute to make a living and dies after sordid car sex with a white "cowboy-rigger oil trash."¹⁹ In a key scene in the novel, June's mother is found in the forest dead of tuberculosis caused by the imperceptibly small germs sometimes used intentionally as weapons. This scene is linked with other scenes where "wild," nonconformist June, in her early forties, dies and revives in the shape of a loud automobile massproduced in big factories. These scenes ponder upon the cleverly-schemed forms of violence, ranging from the invisible extreme like "refined" germ weapons to the conspicuous extreme like dangerously speedy cars, in the 20th century. *Love Medicine* in this way urges the readers to reconsider American history and civilization from the viewpoint of native people, the side of the dispossessed.

Another woman writer representing the 80s is Anne Cameron, whose *Daughters of Copper Woman* (1981) became a best seller in Canada. Cameron is Canadian, but she values her native identity as a Nootka more than the nationality that the modern nation-states have imposed on native peoples already inhabiting the Americas long before 1492. She can be regarded, therefore, as one of the contributors to what Allen calls "a mighty cultural flowering" since Allen advocates a Pan-Indian movement to connect and bring into cooperation all indigenous peoples of the Americas under the Spanish title, "Indianismo."²⁰

In *Daughters of Copper Woman* Cameron employs both prose and verse styles to tell of the invasion of "the Keestadores" or the conquistadores far up to the Pacific coast of Canada, and the consequent disintegration of the old Native Canadian way of life, and to express the conviction that the Native peoples will persevere and survive all hardships to tell their stories.

And the world turned upside down. People got sick and died in ways they had never known. Children coughed until they bled from the lungs and died. . . .

And then new men arrived. Men who never talked to women, never ate with women, never slept with women, never laughed with women.²¹

This scene of the invasion first tells of the germ warfares the aggres-

sors undertook and, then, of the Catholic priests who brought in the woman-hating religion alien to Nootka people. Thus, the first invaders into the Nootka land were Spanish men, and Cameron continues to narrate about their followers, British and American men both bringing in "rum."

All through the narrative Cameron describes the changes by which the traditional woman-centered culture was defeated and despised. Native Canadian women, and certainly Native American women, too, as Allen asserts in her *Sacred Hoop*, used to have much greater political and economic power in pre-Columbian days: they were not caged in the domestic sphere but were respected as equal to men, as even, often, the wiser leaders of the clan government.²²

The sage old woman "Granny" in *Daughters of Copper Women* is the survivor and witness of the extermination program carried out by the white rulers. The portrayal of this great clan mother, who is much akin to the strong female characters in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, conveys the idea that the woman-centered culture has barely escaped decimation, to uphold its energy to the present time. Granny's name is not specified in the novel, making her some kind of a representative of numerous clan mothers who died of the epidemics, the warfares, and alcoholism.

Granny is a member of "the women's secret society,"²³ handing down the old stories that teach the ways of survival to her granddaughter and her granddaughter's woman-friend, and further to her great-granddaughter who is not related to her by blood. All daughters of the ancient "Copper Woman" or "Old Woman," they are thus connected by the will to restore the would-have-been community in which peace and sharing are the principles of daily life.

There are two more unique points that characterize the novel, adding to the themes of reweaving history and re-envisioning women's roles. (1) Cameron does not totally idealize the old tradition or old culture of Nootka people but, rather, casts light on the hidden and silenced heritage of woman-loving and women-networking. (2) The revival of women's pride and dignity is described in the affirmative recognition not only of their mind but also of their body, which the Christian dogma has disavowed.

In the end of the 1980s, Momady wrote his second novel, *The Ancient Child* (1989) 21 years after his first novel, *House Made of Dawn*. In *The Ancient Child* Momady again deals with the theme of being in-

tegrated into the vast universe through heroic ceremony, this time presenting as a hero an accomplished artist named Set.²⁴ Set finds his life in a big city decadent and empty and goes back home to a Navajo village. There he marries Grey, a Navajo vision seer, but then, leaving her pregnant, goes alone into the wilderness to transform himself into a big, powerful bear. It is by this traditional Kiowa way, following the ancient myth of transformation, assuming the spirit of a bear, and becoming one with nature, that he finally attains unique self-realization.

Louis Owens praises *The Ancient Child* for its “romantic ending” and likens it to Momady’s first novel, *House Made of Dawn*, stressing that “[l]ike Abel, and like Momady himself, Set is reintegrated into the mythic reality of his tribe; he has come home.”²⁵ The problems with *The Ancient Child* seem, however, to lie in the very points Owens acclaims.

The ending is actually not so much “romantic” as sentimental since Momady reduces his strong, independent heroine Grey to a stereotyped meek housewife by depriving of her medicine power of metamorphosis and instead bestowing it on the hero Set. Owens, the critic, regards this male-ego-centric plot of power transference as romantic without carefully defining the word “romantic,” missing the point that the plot on the whole inadvertently reveals Momady’s personal wish and life-style, along with the fact that his localism is more “naturalist” than “romantic.”

Another problem with viewing the ending as “romantic” comes from the environmental or ecological reality of the time when the novel was written. By 1989, the situation had become so overwhelmingly critical not only in North America but all over the world that “the mythic reality” in which a man could join the wilderness no longer operated sufficiently even on a symbolic level. The postmodern tones of the 80s and 90s have impelled humanity to realize that they have destroyed nature to the extent that the woods and hills are now too disintegrated to idolize.

The 1980s, from the beginning, saw many gifted poets, especially women poets like Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, and Wendy Rose who voiced the same themes as those expressed in the novels. Allen, the scholar and novelist, Silko, and Erdrich are also renowned poets, and Cameron’s *Daughters of Copper Woman* is in itself an epic poem. It is interesting to observe how these writers so easily cross the border between prose and verse. One reason may be that they have cultivated the

art of narrative from the ceremony of story-telling as an everyday event and, at the same time, have developed an ear for music and poetry from the oral tradition. Having had no written symbols is thus not necessarily a defect or disadvantage of a culture.

Wendy Rose is a mixed-blood of Hopi, Miwok and white, living in San Francisco. She chants of the survival of "the Hopi way"²⁶ or the magical power of Hopi ceremonies in a poem at the end of her collection of poems, *Lost Copper* (1980). In this short poem titled "Epilog" she declares that the proud Native American women poets will endure hardships even though their magical power may no longer work and they have to suffer from the hard "rocks" or barriers of racial and sexual discrimination that have afflicted and will await them.

Epilog

Drop a kernel of corn on a rock
and say a prayer. It will shoot up
proud and green, tassel out,
pull the next crop from the thunderheads.
That's the Hopi way.
If the corn doesn't grow
you eat the rocks,
drink the clouds
on the distant plains.

Silko and Allen and Harjo and me:
our teeth are hard
from the rocks we eat.²⁷

The four women poets Rose names are all linked with and indebted to the vast, dry land of the Southwest, especially New Mexico, where they now own little property but are familiar with the natural power of "corn," "rocks," "thunderheads," "clouds," and "plains." The four poets are tough, Rose assures us, because they have rich, fresh imaginations growing like green corn, their sacred plant, which can encompass the power of their ancestors' land and spirit. Again, the possibility of strong, independent women networking and supporting one another is expressed as a condition of survival, in contrast with the passive, parasitic images of both native and white women still flourishing in popular culture and literature.

III. THE PROSPECT OF THE 90S

Two notable novels were published in 1991, one year before the quincentenary commemorating Columbus's encounter with native peoples on a Caribbean island in 1492. One is *The Crown of Columbus* by Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, and the other *Almanac of the Dead* by Leslie Silko. The two works are good indicators by which to foresee the directions Native American literature will take in the 90s. *The Crown of Columbus* seems to have a few problems that reflect the backlashing cult of conservative marriage and family of the 80s.²⁸ Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, on the other hand, can be regarded as the fourth peak of the Renaissance in the early 90s for its uncompromising renderings of the modern history of Native Americans and the institutions of the United States.

One of the strengths of *The Crown of Columbus* is its reexamination of Columbus's journey to the Bahamas from the standpoint of a contemporary Native American woman anthropologist. The novel has four noteworthy features. (1) The authors try to clarify the sovereignty of the native nations on the Caribbean islands or "the full right to govern their own territory,"²⁹ a theme few novels have dealt with; (2) The heroine Vivian, the anthropologist, is described as a politically correct feminist scholar fighting for the cause of her people and taking the initiative in her Caribbean adventures; (3) The "crown" that she discovers is richly ironic, for instead of being the secular symbol full of jewels that Vivian's greedy enemy has imagined, it is a ragged crown of thorns that signifies Christ's Passion as well as the vanity of human passion for wealth and territory; and (4) The authors try to explore in detail their idea of multiculturalism through the image of a family consisting of mixed racial identities, to offer an antithesis to "cultural purism" or an ethnocentrism that tends to sustain narrow-minded nationalism.

The problems with the novel, however, seem to lie in the fourth aspect. The family Vivian finally forms is a modern nuclear family, created on the basis of a rather old-fashioned melodramatic love between a rich, white man already established in academia and herself, a native woman on the way to making her career. It is briefly insinuated in Vivian's bitter monologue, full of self-scorn, that their union is a modern version of the unequal, exploitative union between Columbus

and Beatriz Peraza, the native Caribbean lover he took to Spain with him.³⁰ The authors, however, do not sustain the cutting, critical edge of postcolonial artists but endorse the modern union and its mixed-blood offspring, Violet, as if she were the ultimate symbol of peace and compromise between white men and native women.

Management of the characters seems to be another problem. The portrayal of Vivian's white husband as her partner is neither satisfactory nor convincing. He is a pedantic descendent of Roger Williams with few commendable features except the fact that Vivian herself regards him as "handsome" and sexy. He has the attitudes of a non-violent dilettante and a passive observer, which contrast with Vivian's vivacious, activist attitudes, and seem to come not so much from a positive decision to oppose the stereotype of masculinity as from the inertia of a wealthy Brahmin. Rescued by Vivian from death, he says in the epilogue, "I've changed,"³¹ finally able to appreciate life and parenthood. What he says, however, is hardly credible, due to the limitations of the first person narrative that works less effectively in this novel than in *Love Medicine*.

The other characters among Vivian's new family are also treated in an inconsistent way. Her powerful, occasionally obnoxious grandmother to whom Vivian has an ambiguous attachment abruptly changes in the end of the novel to become a harmless guardian of Vivian's happy home. Vivian's son from her first husband, Nash, also changes radically towards the end of the novel. He has been a troublemaker in the new family before and during their journey to the Caribbean Sea but after it he completely retreats from the stage of the daily life Vivian and Roger, with their own child, live as two faculty members of New Hampshire College. *The Crown of Columbus*, therefore, is successful as a crown hunting adventure story but superficial even as a home comedy.

Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* is an epic novel that covers two Americas and ranges over the Caribbean islands, Africa, and Asia. It contains the stories of: (1) the ancient treasures stolen from Native American people by invaders old and new; (2) Native American twin sisters, Zeta and Lecha, who survive in contemporary Tucson, Arizona; (3) their efforts to restore and transcribe the old, fragmented "almanac of the dead" that records the history of the native peoples and prophesies the future of the world; (4) signs of the deteriorating modern, white civilization to be found in the corruption of politicians, the military,

businessmen, judges, and police, in cocaine trafficking and the maneuvers of professional murderers, and in the abuse of children, sex, and land; and (5) the future upheavals, supported by the minority groups all over the world, of the oppressed peoples of the Americas.

The vision of a family in *Almanac of the Dead* is more open, inclusive, and cosmopolitan than that in *The Crown of Columbus* although it does not function so well as the latter. Zeta and Lecha maintain an extended family or, rather, a group or loosely organized commune that consists of Lecha's natural son, Ferro, and his male lover, the Laguna Pueblo gardener named Sterling, the white woman secretary Seese, who is looking for her lost baby, and the Korean computer engineer Awa Gee. The "family" seems to be a miniature of the world with its diversity, multicultures and problems.

The twin sisters, Zeta supervising home and Lecha working outside the home as a psychic, will remind some readers of the sacred, complementary sisters, Uretsete and Naotsete, created by Thought Woman in the Keres myths.³² Silko, a Laguna Pueblo born in New Mexico, would be very familiar with these mythic figures. The sisters are described in the novel as middle-aged medicine women who preside over contemporary Native American warfares that involve more than 50 characters whose roles and motivations are vividly narrated.

Zeta and Lecha acquire a full understanding of colonialism from their nonconformist grandmother, Yoeme. The women's wisdom that the works of the 80s began to articulate is all the more clearly expressed in their sense of history and in their relation to the elder women. Yoeme, a Yaqui survivor of the extermination policies in the Southwest, philosophically discerns the nature of colonialism whose violence is approved and upheld by the Christian religion and education.

Yoeme said even idiots can understand a church that tortures and kills is a church that can no longer heal; thus the Europeans had arrived in the New World in precarious spiritual health.³³

There is an almost humorously placid tone in Yoeme's way of teaching European history to her twin granddaughters; clearly the quality of the Native American social protest has been refined since the 60s and the endeavor to rewrite the history and heal the wounds of colonialism is continuing with even greater pride and confidence.

The scope of multiculturalism in *Almanac of the Dead* is much wider

than that in *The Crown of Columbus*, as we can see in the range of the twin sisters' international family members. Furthermore, one of the leaders of the Native American uprisings in the novel organizes a network with "his black Indian cousins"³⁴ in Haiti, Canada, the United States, and Africa.

Black Indians living in Manhattan had long been supplying aid and arms to the Mohawk nations at war with Canada and the United States. . . .

Ignorance of the people's history had been the white man's best weapon.³⁵

The spirits of the "almanac of the dead" that records numerous upheavals and revolts of native peoples and Black slaves since 1492, are handed down in this way to the present time, encouraging both an awareness of "the people's history" and future uprisings of the deracinated and the dislocated on the earth.

Asked about the themes of *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko refers to the crises of contemporary American society that threaten not only Native American cultures but also her own life.

When they went home, the elders saw that the oral tradition could not be maintained, where you have genocide on this scale. We have no guarantee in this new world of the European conquest, we have no guarantee that the three of us [my two sons and I] will still live.³⁶

The image of the Laguna Pueblo gardener, Sterling, seems to reflect the many "elders" with whom Silko must be well acquainted in her daily life. Sterling goes back home from urban California, finds trouble adjusting himself to the traditional way of life in Laguna Pueblo Reservation, and strays out to Tucson to join Zeta's family. The white female character, Seese, is also a stray woman who runs away from the world of injury, sexism and drug dealing, comes to depend on Lecha to seek her missing son, and, like Sterling, joins the family in Tucson.

Silko sees the themes of her novel as presenting "a dream" of overcoming the critical situations of her people as well as the world.

I can write about a dream I had . . . that a great battle in this hemisphere will come down. But I connect it to hundreds of years of exploitation of the Native American people here.³⁷

She also emphasizes that the Native American almanacs have been used not only "for planting" seeds and seedlings but also for project-

ing the past and present "into the future."³⁸ One example of the projected future in the novel, *Almanac of the Dead*, is the prophecy Lecha, the psychic reader of the almanac, announces about natural disasters, among which is an earthquake in Japan.

Lecha warned that unrest among the people would grow due to natural disasters. Earthquakes and tidal waves would wipe out entire cities and great chunks of U.S. wealth. The Japanese were due to be pounded by angry earth spirits, and the world would watch in shock. . . .³⁹

It may be the result of pure coincidence that the prophecy in the novel written in 1991 unluckily came true in Kobe in 1995. This led many Japanese to examine the horror of dislocation, understand the sorrow of dislocated people not only in the Americas but the world over, and reconsider our materialism and prosperity, as has been acquired through the exploitation of less developed countries and the exploitation of ourselves. Many people are, though slowly, getting ready to confront the postmodern illnesses of "unrest" and listen to the voices of "the Dead." Unfolding the graphics of greed, Silko's novel points to the alternative way of living on and cherishing this planet.

CONCLUSION

Paula Gunn Allen claims that the Native American Renaissance is still on its way to maturity and will culminate in the mid-21st century. "Well," she says, "you wait till 2050, we'll be one of the major forces in the literary world."⁴⁰ Many of us shall not live "till 2050" to see whether Allen's prophecy comes true but there are already many promising signs.

Erdrich wrote three novels, *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994), after her first masterpiece, *Love Medicine* (1984), to complete the quartet that Nicola Zand calls the "saga des Indiens du vingtième siècle."⁴¹ This postmodern saga of Erdrich's is worth discussing intensively as a series of four books written in a decade. More women poets like Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Linda Hogan have started to write novels, and writers like James Welch and Gerald Vizenor are continuing to publish novels.⁴² In 1996 Leslie Silko published her first collection of essays, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, in which she discusses Laguna Pueblo culture, history, and her own work in forceful prose full of rage against an oppressive,

dominant culture.⁴³ The field of poetry is also developing dynamically.

Scholars are continuing to study such "classics" as the narratives by Mourning Dove and Black Elk, to restore and record the innumerable oral as well as written traditions, and to examine the relations between these traditions and contemporary creative writing. One scholar, Dexter Fisher, has "discovered" a Dakota woman writer named Zitkala-Ša or a red bird, (1876–1938), and edited her writings under the title of *American Indian Stories* in 1985.⁴⁴ Fisher points out in her "foreword" to Zitkala-Ša's book the threefold difficulties that this forerunner of contemporary Native American writers confronted: (1) Zitkala-Ša received her education in English, at the Carlyle Indian School, and so had to express her Native American causes and creativity in a foreign language; (2) She was "constantly under pressure from [her] own groups to use [her] literature toward socio-political ends;" and (3) She acknowledged the importance of "the heritage of an oral tradition that has its own aesthetic imperatives."⁴⁵

Recognizing the way in which Zitkala-Ša's limitations as a writer came from the fact that she spent most of her energy on progressive reform campaigns for Native Americans, Fisher stresses the point that she tried to overcome these threefold difficulties, emphasizing that it was a wonder "that she wrote at all and in so doing became one of the first Indians to bring to the attention of a white audience the traditions of a tribe as well as the personal sensibilities of one of its members."⁴⁶ Fisher, furthermore, connects Zitkala-Ša, writing at the turn of the century, to the writers of the contemporary Native American Renaissance.

That she did not fully succeed is evident in her work, which is a model of ambivalences, of oscillations between two diametrically opposed worlds, but is also a model of retrieved possibilities, a creative, human endeavor that stands at the beginning of many such endeavors eventually to culminate in the finely crafted work of contemporary American Indian writers.⁴⁷

The contemporary writers of the 60s to the 90s examined so far in this essay seem to be still coping with essentially the same difficulties that Zitkala-Ša confronted. They, however, seem to have found the way to transform the difficulties into potentialities, in creating an original multicultural, prophetic literature. The four themes discussed in this essay are actually interwoven in every work produced by native writers since and even before the 1960s, so that the chronological and thematic division of the Renaissance is simply a device for analyzing the literary

trend.

The writers of the late 1990s are most likely to continue to deal with such themes as recovered identity, social protest, healing for survival, and the telling of their own history in order to assert the value of their experience in the past and their existence in the present world of “pornotechnology”⁴⁸ in which the ominous dislocation of human lives and the earth is going on in more powerful and sophisticated ways than before. Their literary work will offer an antidote or an alternative to the pornotechnological way of life.

As early as 1900 Zitkala-Ša, recollecting her relocation experience from the Yankton Reservation in South Dakota to the Carlyle Indian School in Pennsylvania, writes about her sense of dislocation in religion, education, and civilization itself.

For the white man's papers I had given up my faith in the Great Spirit. . . . I had forgotten the healing in trees and brooks. . . . In this fashion many [Christian palefaces] have passed idly through the Indian schools . . . afterward to boast of their charity to the North American Indian. But few there were who have paused to question whether real life or long-lasting death lies beneath this semblance of civilization.⁴⁹

Her voice is echoed by what the current Native American writers are articulating about the need to regain “real life” to replace the “long-lasting death,” which was a historical experience for many of their ancestors, is the current experience of their contemporaries, and continues to be a grim possibility for their, and our, future.

NOTES

* This essay is based on my presentation at the Session C, titled “Issues on the Native American Studies in North America” in the annual meeting of the Japanese Association for American Studies on June 4, 1995 at Sendai International Center. The author wishes to acknowledge the contribution of the chair, Professor Torao Tomita of Toin College, and the other presenters.

¹ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in the American Indian Traditions* (1986) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), x.

² “Paula Gunn Allen” in Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 28.

³ Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (1992) (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 283–285.

⁴ N. Scott Momady, *House Made of Dawn* (1968) (New York: Harper & Row, 1989),

24.

⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁷ James Welch, *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979) (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 169.

⁸ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977) (New York: Viking Press, 1986), 7.

⁹ Ibid., 254.

¹⁰ Allen, *Winged Words*, op. cit., 20–21.

¹¹ Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* (1983) (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985), xi.

¹² Ibid., xv.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., 272.

¹⁷ Magalaner correctly discusses the symbolic significance of cars in his essay: Marvin Magalaner, "Louise Erdrich/Of Cars, Time, and the River," in *American Women Writers Writing Fiction*, ed. Mickey Pearlman (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989).

¹⁸ "Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris" in Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words*, op. cit., 46.

¹⁹ *Love Medicine*, 8.

²⁰ Paula Gunn Allen, *Grandmother of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1991), 206.

²¹ Anne Cameron, *Daughters of Copper Woman* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1981), 61.

²² Allen discusses "gynocracy" in the Native American traditions in a chapter, "The Ways of Our Grandmothers," in *Sacred Hoop*, op. cit., 9–50.

²³ *Daughters of Copper Women*, 59–63.

²⁴ N. Scott Momady, *The Ancient Child* (1989) (New York: Harper & Row, 1990)

²⁵ Owens, op. cit., 127.

²⁶ Wendy Rose, "Epilog," in *Lost Copper* (1980) (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1993), 128.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ The problems of *The Crown of Columbus* is discussed in Kaeko Mochizuki, "Tabidatsu Josei—Senjumin-sakka ga Egaku Hiroin to Shin-kazoku (Sono 1)" ["Women Starting on a Journey—Native American Writers Creating Travelling Heroines and New Families (Part I)"] in *Ehime Daigaku Kyoyobu Kiyo [Memoirs of Faculty of General Education, Ehime University]*, No. 27, 1994.

²⁹ Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, *The Crown of Columbus* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 204.

³⁰ Ibid., 112.

³¹ Ibid., 374.

³² Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 19–20.

³³ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1991), 718.

³⁴ Ibid., 742.

³⁵ Ibid. William Loren Katz has done comprehensive research on "Black Indians" to throw light on the intermixing of African Americans and Native Americans from the

viewpoint of a historian. His research made Silko's artistic rendering of this unique group of people valid and more interesting. William Loren Katz, *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* (New York: Atheneum, 1986) William Loren Katz and Paula A. Franklin, *Proudly Red and Black: Stories of African and Native Americans* (New York: Atheneum, 1993)

³⁶ "Leslie Marmon Silko," in Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words*, op. cit., 152.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 151–152.

³⁹ *Almanac of the Dead*, 755.

⁴⁰ Allen in *Winged Words*, op. cit., 28.

⁴¹ Nicole Zand, "Louise Erdrich, Indienne Chippewa" in *Le Monde* (edition internationale), Du Jeudi 28 avril au mercredi 4 mai, 1988.

⁴² Listed below are their novels written in the early 90s. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *From the River's Edge* (New York: Arcade, 1991); Linda Hogan, *Mean Spirit* (New York: Atheneum, 1990); James Welch, *The Indian Lawyer* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990); Gerald Vizenor, *The Heirs of Columbus* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1991).

⁴³ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996)

⁴⁴ Zitkala-Ša, *American Indian Stories* (1921) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985)

⁴⁵ Ibid., xvii–xviii.

⁴⁶ Ibid., xviii.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Caputi, inspired by Paula Gunn Allen's thoughts and activities, advocates the restoration of women's powers to campaign against the destructive nuclear weapons and industries sustained by what she terms as "pornotechnology." Jane Caputi, *Gorgons & Crones* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Company, 1993), 257–263.

⁴⁹ Zitkala-Ša, op. cit., 97–99.