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Exiles in Our Own Land: Native American Novelists

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Today I couldn't handle the pain of being an American Indian—Melanie Fey (Dine); As Indigenous women writers and artists we are continually trying to exist, live, and love in a world that doesn't always show its love for us—Tanaya Winder (Duckwater Shoshone); Even during a time of reconciliation, Indigenous people are faced with having to defend their identities from being mocked, used as a trend or form of entertainment every single day—Jessica Deer (Mohawk); As an Indigenous person, I have to escape in order to survive, but I don't just escape. I hold this beautiful, rich Indigenous decolonial space inside and around me—Leanne Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) from #NotYourPrincess (2017).

Native Americans experience a sense of separation from other Americans because we fail to subscribe to the myth of America as an immigrant nation. Many of us live with a feeling of uprootedness because our people were relocated at gunpoint from our ancestral homelands and we often have to migrate to urban areas for employment. We experience a sense of foreignness when we try to explain our cultural values to our neighbours. In mainstream American literature and culture, we are always portrayed as the Other—from sensationalized "Captivity Narratives" to Frederick Jackson Turner's paradigmatic "Frontier Thesis" to Hollywood's *The Searchers*—Americans define themselves by their war against us.

Our sense of being exiles in our own land is institutionalized in American master narratives about nation, race, class, gender, language, and sexuality. Colonial and Neocolonial definitions of these fundamental ontological and epistemological concepts constitute a ubiquity of oppression by the dominant classes. Native American authors, however, have created a form of novelistic dialogue that challenge these dominant conceptualizations and expose them as mere forms of enforced cultural hegemony. In addition, Native American authors use the novel as a tool to facilitate their own affirming self-transformation and to gestate the seeds of self-transformation in fellow Native American readers while simultaneously welcoming non-Native readers to become "woke."

The novel, as defined by Lukács, is the form of narrative that develops in a culture after "beauty" ceases to be "the meaning of the world made visible" (*Theory* 34), before the soul

"knows it can lose itself, [before] it thinks of looking for itself" (30). Specifically, "what is given form [in the novel] is not the totality of life but the artist's relationship with that totality, his approving or condemnatory attitude towards it" (53). Unfortunately, authors cannot create a new totality with their words, "however high the subject may rise above its objects and take them into its sovereign possession, they are still and always only isolated objects, whose sum can never equal a real totality" (53). For Native Americans living in this locus (contemporary North America) and time (the present) "loneliness has become a problem unto itself, deepening and confusing the tragic problem and ultimately taking its place…such loneliness is…the torment of a creature condemned to solitude and devoured by a longing for community" (45). This is poignantly demonstrated in Native American authored novels by James Welch in *The Death of Jim Loney*, N. Scott Momaday in *House Made of Dawn*, Louise Erdrich in *The Round House*, Leslie Silko in *Ceremony*, and Thomas King in *Medicine River* among many others. In addition, Native American novels also often contain the characteristic quest motif, a hero who searches for meaning, for totality, that is no longer immanent (60). Significantly, the "problematic individual" and the "contingent world" are the hallmarks of the novel (78) as described by Lukács in general but particularly of novels by Native Americans.

According to Lukács, "The inner form of the novel has been understood as the process of the problematic individual's journeying towards himself…towards clear self-recognition" (80). And, "The immanence of meaning which the form of the novel requires lies in the hero's finding out through experience that a mere glimpse of meaning is the highest that life has to offer" (80). These characteristics sound remarkably like plot summaries of many contemporary Native American novels. Consequently, the real tension in contemporary Native American novels is between the integrating totality of our not too distant past, which is still a part of our living memory, and the fractured existence of our everyday lives. As a matter of fact, Leslie Silko's novels *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* may even be termed “post-tribal epics,” ala Giorgio Mariani, because they are tied to some other-world totality.

However, many Native American novels emphasize a historical component that allows the Native American reader to reflect on their lost homes and civilization as well as exposing the real causes of their unarticulated feelings of loss and alienation in concrete and tangible ways. Thus, allowing individual Native readers to become conscious of the true origins of their anomie. The resulting detachment from dominant cultural discourse enables Native readers to critique oppressive systems and critically reflect on their sense of self, self-worth, and liberate themselves from self-destructive ideation. Ideally, the “woke” reader will generate their own liberating counter-narratives from their own particular vantage point. Non-Native readers of indigenous novels will also be liberated from an irrational and ahistorical conceptualization of American civilization and be able to be full partners and friends in the land and conceptual space we share.

In order to understand Native American literature, it is necessary to be aware of and listen to Native American literary critics. It is not only counterproductive but also injurious to try to understand and explicate Native American literature using conventions, practices, assumptions, and techniques that have long served to oppress the very voices and narratives that constitute Native American literature. For example, non-Native literary critic Christina Patterson agrees

with Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little Horse* that "clearly we are in the realm of magical realism; where the wilder reaches of Catholicism mingle with the hopes and dreams of a community whose traditions are in disarray and where the search for rigid classifications—saint, sinner, or miracle—is doomed to collapse in the face of messy reality" (9 March 2002). Well, she does get some things right: Erdrich's novel does address a community in disarray and her narrative does challenge the rigid classifications of the dominant society. However, the critical template of magical realism is anathema to understanding the text on its own terms. Magical realism is a form of literary criticism that colonizes instead of explicates.

To understand why magical realism is a form of literary criticism that colonizes instead of explicates, we have to take a look at its origin. While many articles and books have been written on the topic of magical realism, and some are not as racialist as others, it is important to keep in mind that the atavistic origin of magical realism is found in a seminal text on the subject by Amaryll Chanady published in 1985. In *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy*, Chanady asserts that a dichotomous way of thinking is expressed in magical realism, which she juxtaposes as the so-called "primitive," "archaic" American Indian mentality and the mentality of the "erudite," "rational," "empirical," "super-civilization" of Europe.

Chanady's racialist theory of narrative also assumes an exclusive white Western reader for magical realist narratives. White reader's sensibilities, she asserts, will not be challenged because "the reader considers the represented world as alien" and because of the "impossibility of complete reader identification in the case of a Magico-Realist work about American Indians" (163). She claims that "while the [white] reader accepts the unconventional world view [of the American Indian], he does so only within the contexts of the fictitious world, and does not integrate it in his own perception of reality" (163). In critical parlance, Chanady is referring to the focalizer in narrative. In magical realism, for example, the focalizer is European: "The Indians are the object, not the subject, of focalization" (35).

It is important to always ask, "Whose point of view is being expressed?" Chanady is correct to note who a reader is supposed to identify with but is in error in assuming that a non-Native reader will be unable to identify with a Native American character. In Native American novels "Indians" are the subjects, not the object, of focalization. Thus, it is erroneous to use the critical template of magical realism with its attendant racialist suppositions to describe or interpret novels by Native Americans. As a matter of fact, the term "magical realism" may only accurately be used to describe a text about Native Americans authored by non-Indians and wherein the indigenous characters are presented as objects instead of subjects. As Mohawk author Jessica Deer writes in #NotYourPrincess, every single day "indigenous people are faced with having to defend their identities from being mocked, used as trend or form of entertainment" (Charleyboy 61).

M. Annette Jaimes' *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, suggests that denying the subject status of indigenous people is why acclaimed and Nobel Prize winning non-Native authors of magical realism (strictly defined according to Chanady's paradigm) have ignored and at times even facilitated the destruction of indigenous

people and communities. How did Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez fail to note the destruction of indigenous communities by the Colombian government? Where are the crimes Mexico committed against indigenous people documented in Mexican writer Juan Rulfo’s oeuvre? More damning is Guatemalan literary giant Miguel Ángel Asturias, who as an official of the Guatemalan government, participated in the razing of Maya villages. Many of Chile's Isabelle Allende’s fans may be surprised to find her labeling the indigenous population of her country as "placidly evil" (430-2). Edward Said warns that the “fictional myopia of the real-life suffering of real-life people is simply a continuing white tradition” (55-62).

Although Chanady claims magical realism to be the product of the synthesis of the dialectical relationship between two civilizations, she assumes an exclusive non-Native audience and that Native people will be portrayed as objects, not subjects. In the twenty-first century these racialist, unscientific, and irrational aspersions as a foundational theory of literature is simply unacceptable. Because of the inclusion of non-white, non-Western writers and scholars we now know that all people are capable of rational and irrational thought, rational and irrational behavior, and empirical and metaphysical reasoning. No longer may people and races be said to be stereotypically reduced to one or the other. In fact, Chanady's characterization of mental capabilities according to race may be characterized as not simply racialist but racist and we cannot use a template based on assumptions about the superiority of one race and civilization over another to explicate Native American texts or non-Western texts. The template and the resulting interpretation are not only erroneous, but underpin dominant concepts that enforce a sense of exile and inferiority on Native American readers while reinforcing the non-Native readers’ sense of superiority and dominance.

I am not proposing that we dismiss Western literary criticism in totality. Just as I am not suggesting that Native American storytellers reject the novel for more traditional forms of storytelling. For instance, some of Chanady’s critical analysis is not based on race or presumed civilizational hierarchies and is, indeed, helpful. She writes: “The mystery of life does not exist in objective reality, but in the subjective reaction to and interpretation of the world…the amalgamation of realism and fantasy is the means to an end, and this is the penetration of the mystery of reality” (27).

A number of Native American literary critics have proposed a number of ways to really look (non-myopic) at indigenous novels. These are not, as a body of texts, a rejection of rigorous critique or shunning of the integration of scientific literary analysis. Indeed, they, like the Native American novel, are a syncretic cultural manifestation that is dialogical and original, a balm to the centuries-old injuries of the indigenous civilization currently sharing America. For example, Native American authors, storytellers and critics, generally share the mimetic school of literary criticism’s view that literature has the power to heal and that moral values that create a sense of mutual care and responsibility through generating empathy and understanding of the cares and pains of other knowing selves are a necessary component of literature. It does this by embracing a realist and subjective aesthetic, the application of realistic historical and experiential sensibilities, and the careful listening for voices embedded in the narrative. Likewise, many Native American authors embrace the postmodern aesthetic of suspending disbelief, fabulation, and an intransitive form of writing inasmuch as it does not really resolve or come together in any

finite or circumscribed way. In addition, the postmodern is multi-vocal and polyglot, rejecting any overriding single conception of reality or being in favour of a process of constant discovery and re-creation—a reflection of the incredible diversity of indigenous America.

Native American novelists embracing a spirit of constant discovery and re-creation is necessary for a revitalization of American literature. American literature and criticism are sorely in need of new points of views and ideas. As early as 1967 John Barth claims in his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" that conventional forms, genres and modes, are "used up" and their possibilities exhausted. Unfortunately, his essay has been widely misinterpreted to mean that literature itself is exhausted. However, as he subsequently explained in his 1979—admittedly, a long pause—essay, "The Literature of Replenishment," he simply means that new forms of writing, specifically what he terms postmodernist fiction, need to be developed. It is time to welcome America's indigenous authors to participate. Bakhtin wrote in *Formal* that "New means of representation force us to see new aspects of visible reality"(134). Unfortunately, Native American contributions have yet to be commonly accepted or used by non-Native scholars and rarely, if ever, used by mainstream book reviewers. And, how can Native American contributions to literature be fully appreciated if there is not a corresponding working theory of criticism by which to evaluate, interpret, and appreciate the texts?

Harold Schweizer's book *Suffering and the Remedy of Art* encourages authors and readers to reconsider the aesthetics of the novel. It is about "wounds that will not close despite the sutures, scarring, and bandaging, the patchwork and layering of literary technique" (1). Although Schweizer does not examine Native American literature per se, Native American novels demonstrate the power of his thesis. As he explains: "In the experience of suffering the ideology of objectivity, the claims of reason and knowledge, are called into question. Philosophical distinctions of body and spirit, sensation and intellect, the universal and the particular, the physical and the metaphysical, no longer apply" (2).

Also consider, for example, two novels by Pulitzer Prize winning author N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa): *House Made of Dawn* and *The Ancient Child*. *The Ancient Child* is the chronicle of a man's journey into madness, facilitated by a world of broken connections and other wounded people, particularly, a tragically wounded young woman, Grey. And, Abel, the protagonist in *House Made of Dawn*, is alone and silent at the end of the novel, just as he is at the beginning: "He was alone and running on… There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song" (Momaday, *House* 191). Abel may have the words to the song of healing, but pointedly he is unable to articulate them, the word remains unspoken. Many non-Native authors, however, remark on Abel and Set's respective triumphs—when the characters are, in fact, tropes of the idea that the average Native American can triumph in America.

Abel's (*House Made of Dawn*) and Set's (*The Ancient Child*) underlying problem is that they do not know who their fathers are and, consequently, do not know who they are either. Critics have long neglected the fact that the father is absent in almost every contemporary Native American novel, which, it should be noted, stands in stark contrast to the stereotypical American novel in which it is not the absent father, but a dominating father that is ubiquitous. Thus, *The Ancient Child* and *House Made of Dawn* are really novels of suffering, but not futile suffering if

it awakens a reader's consciousness and conscience. Novels of suffering may perform their function of raising consciousness by reducing the "distances among writer, text, what is written about, and finally, the reader, [so they] all converge on a single point " (Lang xii).

N.Scott Momaday cites his mentor Yvor Winters' assertion that: "Unless we understand the history which produced us, we are determined by that history; we may be determined in any event, but the understanding gives us a chance" (Schubnell xvi). Schubenell describes Momaday's writing as "a way to create an understanding of self and history through language" (xvi). On another occasion, Momaday claims his "authority to write about the Indian world" is "based upon experience" (Isernhagen 52).

Native American authors often provide non-Native focalizers for non-Natives that embrace the universality of many of our experiences, particularly experiences of suffering. For example, Milly, in *House Made of Dawn*, is a fully-developed character with a voice and an attitude. In many ways she is the white, female equivalent of Abel. She has her own broken connections. Like Abel, she, too, has lost her father and mother and child (granting for the moment that Peter is Abel's child). She grew up watching her father "beaten by the land" and daily going into the fields "without hope," until the day he put her on a bus and told her goodbye, and she never saw him again (114-5). And, then she lost her four-year-old daughter, Carrie. As Schweizer explains, in his book’s thesis “the experience of suffering the ideology of objectivity, the claims of reason and knowledge, are called into question.” (2).

While there is truth to Schweizer's conclusion about suffering being universal, suffering is not necessarily individualized and ahistorical—it is also communal and historical. For example, the passage from the beginning of Louise Erdrich's (Anishinaabe) *Tracks* strikes a familiar chord with many Native Americans because it is part of our shared history:

> We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. For those who survived the spotted sickness from the south, our long flights west…then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers…by then we thought disaster must surely have spent its force, that disease must have claimed all of the Anishinabe that the earth could hold and bury. But the earth is limitless and so is luck and so were our people once (1).

Likewise, Linda Hogan (Chickasaw) describes the phenomenon eloquently in her novel *Power*: “History is the place where the Spanish cut off the hands of my ancestors. The Spanish who laughed at our desperation and dying, and I wish it didn't but history still terrifies me so that I dream it in dreams with skies the color of green bottle glass” (73).

Unflinching realism is vital in Native American novels. It is only through realism that readers are able to “accept the concept of the complete human personality as the social and historical task humanity has to solve; only if we regard it as the vocation of art to depict the most important turning-point of this process with all the wealth of the factors affecting it; only if

aesthetics assign to art the role of explorer and guide, can the content of life be systematically divided into spheres of greater and lesser importance" (Lukács 7).

According to Bakhtin a shared view of the world between author and reader, the realist aesthetic or verisimilitude, is then the underlying goal of all socially relevant fiction (135). Jessica Deer (Mohawk) writes, "the highly inaccurate and dehumanizing representations of Indigenous peoples in sports, on television, on the runway, or in costumes on the shelves of a Halloween store shape much of what people know and think about us...and that affects how society understands the real social, political, and economic issues we face" (Charleyboy 61). In other words, meaning matters for the author, the reader, and society. The question then becomes a matter of whose meanings and of what matters. Rodney Livingstone writes that for Lukács what we see is appearance, whereas the great novelist reveals the driving forces of history which are invisible to actual consciousness (12). In other words, it is the author's job to enable the reader to see through the "veils of reification" that blind one's vision of one's true self and one's true relation to other selves.

Lukács's form of realism involves a genuine love for humanity and a thirst for life. For example, he writes that without "love for humanity and life in general, something that necessarily involves the deepest hatred for a society, classes and their representatives who humiliate and deform human beings, it is impossible for any genuinely major realism to develop" (*Essays* 148). It is also vital to remember that "the tremendous social power of literature consists in the fact that it depicts the human being directly and with the full richness of his inward and outward life" (*Essays* 143). In doing so, a good critic will, in Momaday's words, "enable us to better understand literature," and "show us things that we might not see for ourselves" (Isernhagen 58).

The type of realism that Lukács advocates and those Native American authors aspire to is impossible without including numerous authentic and embodied voices in the text. Bakhtin's term for this is Heteroglossia. Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan explains this concept in her poem, "Tear": "I remember the women/Tonight they walk/out from the shadows/with black dogs/children, the dark heavy horses/and the worn-out men/ They walk inside me. This blood/is a map of the road between us/I am why they survived . . . I am the tear between them/and both sides live" (Charleyboy 14). These voices, sometimes referred to by Bakhtin as languages, are the result of real, lived experiences, personal, communal, historical, that culminate in various particular world-views that are expressed in the words, syntax, metaphors, grammar, and tone of a speaking subject that is, more or less, conscious of his or her subjectivity, or beingness vis-à-vis other beings.

Native American novels are also frequently polyphonic. Polyphony is closely related to heteroglossia, even sometimes confused with heteroglossia. Polyphony refers to a plurality of consciousnesses (Morson 238), not simply languages. In addition, these consciousnesses represent the lived life experiences of embodied voices. Hunkpapa Lakota author Tiffany Midge expresses the concept this way, "When I think of a model of Indigenous womanhood, I immediately think of my mother: a woman who lost her own mother when she was sixteen, became a widow at twenty-one with a baby girl, and no education or prospects…I also think of

my grandma Eliza, a woman who grew up dirt poor, who scraped out a living, her clothes threadbare through long, cold winters spent eating the same meal" (Charleyboy 67).

N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) explains a similar phenomenon as a process of learning, sometimes long after publication, "what's really going on" (Abbott 30). He explains: "When a man is writing, he is operating on two levels: he writes out of his consciousness and out of his unconsciousness. And very many times he will not, after the fact, know all about his writing" (30). He explains in a later interview with Gretchen Bataille that while writing there are things he understood "on one level and ha[s] come to understand on a different level and will again in the future understand on yet another level" (63). Along these same lines, Momaday consistently refuses to answer what happens to Abel after the end of the novel *House Made of Dawn*. His typical response is, "your idea is as good as mine" (Bonnetti 140): indicating that Abel has an existence independent of the author which somehow occurs through the dynamic process of storytelling (Bonetti 131).

False consciousness or inauthentic voices are also a concern for Native American authors. For instance, Greg Sarris (Miwok) warns of his struggle with a false consciousness in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, a Fanonian (Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*) consciousness of internal colonization manifested through self-destructive behavior and self-loathing. Hayles worries that the "disintegration of the subject [authentic consciousness] will precipitate a crisis in representation which makes a traditional novel impossible to write" (*Chaos* 256). However, we should also keep in mind what Sholes notes in *Structural Fabulation*, "in its cognitive function, fiction helps us to know ourselves and our existential situation" (5).

The realism of Native American novels gives added poignancy to the so-called magical element which is not magical at all. As explained, use of the term 'magical', as opposed to the more accurate ascription of the considered use of postmodern sensibilities and strategies by Native American authors to subvert hegemonic cultural discourses in reference to Native American history, ontology, and epistemology, is fallacious and harmful. N. Katherine Hayles warns us that "theories about language which claim that it is free to be interpreted in any way whatsoever are the allies and precursors of state terrorism" (*Chaos* 126). Native Americans have a long experience with state terrorism and it is known as colonialism.

Critics who fail to make the distinction between magical realism and postmodern sensibilities fail to recognize the conceptual ecology of Native American novels. According to Stanislaw Lem a "conceptual ecology" is one in which within any given conceptual space, which he calls a topology, certain forms are facilitated while others are suppressed. The "particularities of history and personality determine which actually appear and which are repressed. All forms that are realized…are linked to each other by the common attributes that define the space" (Hayles, *Chaos* 185). The contemporary Native American novel is an emergent form and the product of a literary community with a common socio-historical experience and facing similar epistemological and ontological challenges to their survival.

Instead of labeling Thomas King's (Cherokee) *Green Grass, Running Water* as magical realism, let's take the postmodern anti-realist elements in the novel seriously. If we do, we see

that his novel reveals the absurdity of life, of history; moreover, we often cannot make sense of them, and the harder we try, the greater fools we make of ourselves. For instance, just as the witnesses' differing descriptions of the tricksters vary from observer to observer to observer in *Green Grass, Running Water*, our perception of reality and anti-reality varies. Despite the posturing and polemics of King's characters, in the end chaos and uncertainty, angst, and purposelessness appears to rule the universe and drives what we call history. It is comic only in the sense that it is a maniacal laugh into the maw of the abyss. Similarly, Linda Hogan's (Chickasaw) Pulitzer Prize nominated *Mean Spirit* contains a minor character that the reader is asked to believe is a ghost. However, *Mean Spirit* is not a ghost story. The ghost is there to present a meta-textual perspective on historical events.

Unfortunately, Native American authors are often exiles from the dominant literary community of America. Literary critics and fellow novelists who should be our allies are sometimes our enemies. For instance, in W.J. Stuckey's *The Pulitzer Prize Novels: A Critical Backward Look*, Stuckey claims Momaday was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, not because of merit, but because 1969 "was not a year remarkable for good fiction" (226). He does not cite any of the committee members to support his malign claim. Stuckey's explication of the novel reduces the symbolism, the allegorical functions, and the interpersonal implications of the characters and actions to one single, simple metaphor with the purpose of blaming the white man. Stuckey claims that the scene between Abel and the "white woman" (tellingly, Stuckey does not ever use her name) is an "obvious" metaphor for the corruption of Indians by white society. However, Abel has affairs with two white women: Angela Grace St. John and Milly. Although Angela Grace St. John exploits Abel, Milly represents a clear opportunity for Abel to make a vital, loving connection, which he lamentably fails to seize.

It seems difficult for Stuckey to imagine Momaday as anything but a simple Indian. He repeatedly uses the word "pretentious" in reference to Momaday. However, it should be noted that pretentious means pretending, make-believe, playing-at, in essence Stuckey's aspersion is not a literary one, but a pejorative personal one, one of character: Momaday is an Indian playing at being an author, he is only pretending, imitating, mimicking, being a writer.

As a Chickasaw PhD candidate I almost asked a professor to be a member of my dissertation committee who shared Stuckey's attitude. Fortunately, a white friend informed me that when he told this professor that he selected Native American literature as the focus of his studies, this professor asked him: "You are smart, why don't you study real literature?" Until these attitudes change, Native Americans will continue to be exiles in our own land. A good beginning is to accept Native Americans as equals. Take Indigenous voices and literature seriously. Invite Native Americans to be participants and partners.

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