

Postwar American Avant-Garde (AE 117)  
<http://eclass.uoa.gr/courses/ENL325/>  
**Beyond "survivance": Native American Art**

**FROM** Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995)

..although many early twentieth-century American artists shared with their European counterparts a desire to attack the values of bourgeois culture, their fascination with indigenous art had a distinctly nationalist element, since they were seeking the basis for an authentic native American modernism. Furthermore, the transformation of artifact into art involved not only postmodernist recognition of the aesthetic value of Native cultural objects and political nationalism, but obviously also the site and system whereby "primitive" art was institutionalised. [...]

Native American art, and its attendant notions about landscape, self, and consciousness, as perceived by the modernists, provided a powerful justification for finding spiritual value in abstraction. [...]

The idea of an aboriginal America, manifest in primitive art, myths, and rituals, was a staple of avant-garde discourse, both visual and verbal, in New York in the 1940s. [...] modernism's self-defined universality seemed to justify its appetite for the cultural forms of Native Americans and other "Others."

There is a need for] a new historiography, a structural analysis beyond the postmodernist base [...] There are still homogenous representations of our communities, and we must go beyond that to their diversity and heterogeneity, But we also need to get beyond *that* – beyond mainstream and malestream, even beyond the "positive images" – to undermine binary oppositions of positive and negative: male/female, Black/White, straight/gay, etc [...]

**FROM** Cornel West, Interview with Anders Stephanson, *Flash Art I* (April 1987) cited by Lucy Lippard in *Mixed Blessings*

We seek new forms of authority and autonomy, not assimilation, as the basis for integration into the global community.

**FROM** Homi Bhabha, 'Caliban Speaks to Prospero: Cultural Identity and the Crisis of Representation,' in *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing*, ed. Philomena Mariani (Seattle: Bay Press, 1993)

**FROM** Gerald Vizenor, 'Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice' in Gerald Vizenor (e.) *Narratives of Native Presence*

The theories of survivance are elusive, obscure, and imprecise by definition, translation, comparison, and catchword histories, but survivance is invariably true and just in native practice and company. The nature of survivance is unmistakable in native stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions, and customs and is clearly observable in narrative resistance and personal attributes, such as humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage. The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihilism, and victimry.

Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent. Survivance is greater than the right of a survivable name.

Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry. Survivance is the heritable right of succession or reversion of an estate and, in the course of international declarations of human rights, is a narrative estate of native survivance.

**FROM** Lucy Lippard, 'Mapping', in *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990)

This is a time of tantalizing openness to (and sometimes untrustworthy enthusiasms about) "multiculturalism." The context does not exist for a nice, seamless narrative and probably never will. [...]

I write in what the white ethnographer James Clifford has called "that moment in which the possibility of comparison exists in unmediated tension with sheer incongruity . . . a permanent ironic play of similarity and difference, the familiar and the strange the here and the elsewhere"; and I have tried, as he suggests, not to "explain away those elements in the foreign culture that render the investigator's own culture newly incomprehensible". [...]

Without minimizing the economic and psychological toll of racism in this country, and without exaggerating the strengths that have resulted in survival, it is still possible to recognize the depth of African, Native American, Asian, and Latino cultural contributions to an increasingly confused, shallow, and homogenized Euro-American society. The exclusion of those cultures from the social centers of this country is another mixed blessing. Drawn to the illusory warmth of the melting pot, and then rejected from it, they have frequently developed or offered sanctuary to ideas, images and values that otherwise would have been swept away in the mainstream. [...] Postmodern analysis has raised important question about power, desire, and meaning that area applicable to cross-cultural exchange (although there are times when it seems to analyze everything to shreds, wallowing in textual paranoia). The most crucial of these insights is the necessity to avoid thinking of other cultures as existing passively in the past, while the present is the property of an active "Western civilisation." Both women and artists of color are struggling to be perceived as subject rather than object, independent participants rather than socially constructed pawns. Since the late sixties, the feminist movement's rehabilitation of subjectivity in the face of the dominant and loftily "objective" stance had been one model in the ongoing search for identity within so-called minority groups. It is precisely the false identities to which deconstructionism calls attention that have led women and people of color to an obsession with self-definition, to a re-creation of identity from the inside out. On the other hand, overemphasis on static or originary identity and notions of "authenticity" imposed from the outside can lead to stereotypes and false representations that freeze non-Western cultures in an anthropological present or an archaeological past that denies their heirs a modern identity or political reality on an equal basis with Euro-Americans.

**FROM** Nancy Marie Mithlo, No word for art in our language? Old questions, new paradigms

*Wicazo Sa Review*. 27.1 (Spring 2012):

From one perspective, the "no word for art" descriptor indicates an Indigenous rejection of how Native arts are perceived in non-Native contexts such as museums, cultural centers, galleries, and scholarly texts--contexts that imbue fine arts with the Western values of individualism, commercialism, objectivism, and competition, as framed by an elitist point of reference. A rejection of the term "art" is then a rejection of Western culture as capitalist, patriarchal, and, ultimately, shallow, one that does not value the central principles of Indigenous identity, such as land, language, family, and spirituality. A refusal to be co-opted into a more narrow definition of what is an intrinsically more holistic enterprise is also a refusal to be named. It is an effort toward self-determination. [...]

A rejection of art as an established category found favor in the 1980s, but for very different reasons. First, as a separatist claim to Indigeneity, the politically charged era of Indian rights legislation supported "no word for art" perspectives. Second, in the gluttonous decorative Indian arts market in regional settings such as Santa Fe, "no word for art" enabled the crafting of a sellable authentic Indian artist and artwork, untainted by modernist desires. Third, in the "new museology" era of cultural institutions serving unique constituents, "no word for art" signaled an embrace of multiculturalism and difference. And fourth, according to Price, "no word for art" released scholars from the obligation to take Native knowledge systems into consideration, an assumption that even Native scholars and artists adopted. Ward Churchill, another alleged ethnic Indian fraud writer, has claimed, "'Art,' like 'philosophy' and 'religion,' is not an American Indian concept. It is a notion and a category of activity imported from Europe right along with the horse, firearms, trade beads and smallpox. In this sense, contemporary efforts to define what is traditional American Indian art and who are legitimate Americans are more than passingly absurd." (20) While each of these manifestations of the "no word" phenomenon proved remarkably flexible in meeting varying constituents' needs, none propelled the development of scholarship, offering as they did confusing and conflicted meanings for both the buying public and the academic community.

**FROM** Karen Ohnesorge, Uneasy terrain: image, text, landscape, and contemporary indigenous artists in the United States *The American Indian Quarterly*. 32.1 (Winter 2008):

Like many contemporary Indigenous artists in the United States, Quick-to-See Smith seeks to clarify existing relationships among race, place, and economics as well as to create new relationships. In particular, she and her peers combine image and text to interrogate the genre of landscape painting as a stage for fantasies of racialized white manifest destiny. These artists require viewers to don, as Quick-to-See Smith puts it, a "cultural-turning-around headset" to engage with "a different way of thinking" ("Interview Transcript") about the place "we" call "our" "homeland." Their verbal-pictorial critique of the hegemony of American landscape art draws on two phenomena: first, landscape's historical support of colonialist efforts to displace Indigenous peoples, and, second, the widespread but undertheorized practice among artists and writers of color of fusing image and text to refute racism.

**FROM** Simon J. Ortiz, 'Collaboration and Syncretism,' in *American Indian Quarterly*, Summer 2011, 35: 3  
 Today, numbers of us do not acknowledge our Indigenous tribal identities. Because we feel we cannot; we are confused; we feel ambiguous and uncertain. And we feel invalid when we do acknowledge, claim, and announce our Indigenous identities. We sometimes even feel we are imposters. Imposters? Yes, imposters who are posing as Indigenous tribal peoples! That's absurd, isn't it? Yes, it is, yet there are those among us who feel like that. They feel like imposters, whether comfortably or not comfortably may vary, even, at the same time, knowing, realizing, and admitting it is the circumstance and condition of colonization that has caused or precipitated the feeling of being imposters. It is a maddening feeling, isn't it?

**FROM:** Andrew Wiget, (ed.) *Dictionary of Native American Literature* (Garland: New York, 1994)  
 Native American literature opened the difficult questions of tradition and influence, of the relationship between speech and writing, precisely at that moment in the evolution of literary criticism in the West when those topics were coming under the closest scrutiny. The argument over what was worth reading was clearly a transformation of the argument over how to read. While it was clear that contemporary Native American writers wanted to repudiate any kind of cultural determinism in the formation of their work, they were often driven, both by the needs of mass-market merchandising and by the presence of readers from their own communities of origin, to unambiguously address in their own persons that which had always been ambiguous: their own conflicted identities and the multiplicity of voices these generated. In this way, determinations of what counted as Native American literature often devolved into arguments over what and who were authentically Native American. Arguments over *who* speaks, and *how*, were endlessly debated in professional conferences, donut shops, classrooms, and, in not a few cases, on Indian reservations.

**FROM** Arnold Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin* (1989) cited by Sidner Larson 'An Attitude of Relationship' in Zamora, L. (ed) *Contemporary American Women Writers: Gender, Class, Ethnicity* (London: Longman, 1998)  
*Indigenous literature* I propose as the term for that form of literature which results from the *interaction* of local, internal, traditional, tribal, or 'Indian' literary modes with the dominant literary modes of the various nation-state in which it may appear. Indigenous literature is that type of writing produced when an author of subaltern cultural identification manages successfully to merge forms internal to his cultural formation with forms external to it, but pressing upon, even seeking to delegitimize it.

**FROM** Sidner Larson 'An Attitude of Relationship' in Zamora, L. (ed) *Contemporary American Women Writers: Gender, Class, Ethnicity*

The broad features of American Indian Literature are comprised of both spoken and written elements. The spoken elements are related to native oral tradition, the practice of telling and re-telling stories that have been passed down from generation to generation. [...] The oral telling of stories [...] is a way of dealing with a chaotic world in a more organised manner by providing explanations and making associations. In another sense it is an interweaving process that bends time and sequence to its own purposes and is ever-changing with each re-telling of stories.

Written representations of Native American literature are even more multi-dimensional. Most broadly they are comprised of a combination of the elements of oral tradition and the elements of Euramerican tradition, which is almost strictly based on the written word. Some of the features of Native American literature include: enhanced levels of participation stemming from the oral tradition of storytelling; a 'curing' phenomenon related to cultural bridging and regard for all forms of life as well as the environment; seeming fragmentation of thought and use of circular rather than linear time, resulting in unique structures; a more individualised concern with identity; and an increased incidence of ethnographic and historical content. [...]

Considering how hard native Americans have had to struggle with issues of assimilation, acculturation, acceptance and rejection, it is no wonder that concern with identity surfaces so frequently in Native American literature.

**FROM** Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the Native American Novel* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992)

[Indian identity is] a treasured invention. The Indian [...] in today's world consciousness is a product of literature, history, and art, and a product that, as an invention, often bears little resemblance to actual, living Native American people.