Janet McAdams

A Conversation with Simon Ortiz

Poet and critic Janet McAdams interviews Simon Ortiz, guest editor of this special issue of *The Kenyon Review* devoted to work by North American indigenous authors.

Janet McAdams: So many misunderstandings exist about Native people, history, and culture. Given that some readers of *The Kenyon Review* may be new to Native writing, what might surprise them in this issue? What might be challenging or revelatory?

Simon Ortiz: There are many misunderstandings about Indigenous peoples, their history, and their culture. Actually, that's a vast understatement! And more, actually, than an understatement, so much so that it's funny! Except that it's not really funny.

Paul Chaat Smith, a Comanche writer and cultural arts critic, recently published a book called *Everything You Know About Indians Is Wrong!* A comical but deadly book, that kind of funny! Many Americans do not know what is the right, correct, actual, and true knowledge of Indigenous peoples of the Americas. To them, even the wrongest, most incorrect, and truthless knowledge is the right knowledge.

It doesn't matter; there is no difference. Because of assumptions made about "Indians." "Indians" live in teepees. "Indians" are savage and heathen and barbaric. "Indians" are lazy, shiftless, unemployed,

unemployable, and drunks. "Indians" have no feelings. "Indians" are natural like the trees, deserts, rain. That's the kind of knowledge inculcated into most segments of the American public, whoever and wherever they may be, including Indigenous peoples themselves to a degree! So, yes, of course, the ideas, the fluency, skill, talent, artistry, the beauty, grace, and complexity of writing by Indigenous writers in this *Kenyon Review* issue may surprise, even startle readers. And astound, confound, perhaps confound them again, and shock them! Good, I'd say!

It's a fact that Indigenous peoples are misconceived. The term "Indian" is still the most common American term for identification of Indigenous peoples. Even though "Indian" is so fraught and loaded down with the baggage of negative colonial history, derogation, and ill intent, it is still the official term most known and used by the public. To many Indigenous American peoples, "Indian" is a mark of disdain and ill fame because it simplistically places them in a social and political construction that inferiorizes and demonizes them. I purposely and intentionally use the term *Indigenous* to refer directly to Indigenous American peoples because the term is neutral; its meaning is based on Indigenous American peoples being native and/or aboriginal to the lands of their origin. Dai-sthee-stuh-tah-ahtyu-shee-hanoh tsee-ehmee Indigenous stuu-tah-ah! Those of us people who are from and of here, these are the ones who are Indigenous! There is no going around this fact.

Along with an insistence upon our own terminology, there is a necessary awareness or consciousness that has to do with our Indigeneity, and that has very direct bearing upon the land, culture, and community of Indigenous America. Ultimately, this

consciousness is at the core of ourselves who are from and of the land, culture, and community of the Indigenous Americas. There is no going around this fact either: the knowledge of land, culture, and community as known, experienced, ascertained, evolved, created by Indigenous peoples is basic and primary. This was apparent to the first Europeans who experienced first landfall in the Americas; Europeans knew very little or next to nothing about the Indigenous lands of the continents and adjacent islands; they relied, in fact, practically and necessarily, upon Indigenous native peoples. In other words, Europeans from the very beginning depended upon Indigenous land, culture, and community for knowledge they needed to survive and thrive. And today, this is still the case. All knowledge-consciousness comes first from a basic and primary source: the land, culture, and community of the Indigenous Americas.

Challenging and revelatory? Indeed, it is so. And we Indigenous Americans justifiably have no legitimate reason to identify ourselves as "Indian" either. Also many Indigenous Americans do not accept being called "Indian." And I'll say this is good. Wouldn't you?

JMc: The scope of the issue is impressive. You've included work from well-known writers such as Leslie Silko and Joy Harjo, and from younger, emerging writers. Likewise, writers from many different Indian nations are represented here. How did you go about making selections for the issue?

SO: Writers and poets who are of Indigenous American heritage and identity now abound in greater numbers. There is no question about that, and it's quite wonderful and inspiring for that to be the

case. I remember the 1960s when I started college and had "urgings" to write stories and poetry. There was no published "Indian"—that was the identity word then—literature except "Indian stories" that were usually the offshoot of white ethnologists and anthropologists who did research on the "vanishing Red Man." No matter how hard one looked in libraries practically everywhere across the nation, no books by Indigenous authors were to be found, because none were published by trade book publishers or academic presses. A few booklets, usually transcriptions of traditional stories told in Indigenous languages originally, produced in the 1930s through the 1960s by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, did exist minimally.

The Institute of American Indian Arts started in Santa Fe in the mid-60s, and creative writing was happening there. Here and there, Indigenous people were writing, and I was one of them. As was Blackfeet poet James Welch, who I learned of when a friend told me James was a U. of Montana brilliant writing student of well-known poet Richard Hugo. And soon there was Leslie Marmon Silko at UNM where I was a student by then. And I think Paula Gunn Allen was around, too, although not published yet. Most of us weren't. Even Kiowa poet and fiction writer N. Scott Momaday, practically the only Indigenous poet published in a literary periodical or two, was not published very much then, although in a few years he would be awarded a Pulitzer.

Since the 1960s there has been a slow but steady increase in the numbers of Indigenous writers, poets, playwrights, whose works are being published. Now, writers like Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo, LeAnne Howe, Allison HedgeCoke, whose works are in this *KR* issue, have their books shelved in public libraries alongside other

nationally acclaimed writers. And emerging poets like Eddie Chuculate, Eric Gansworth, Sara Marie Ortiz, Mark Turcotte, Rainy Ortiz, and Orlando White are evolving more and more into the literary canon and landscape that is now more vibrantly multiethnic than ever. Finding Indigenous writing from all tribal nations of the Indigenous American world is not difficult if one keeps an open eye, ear, and mind. I've been around as a writer, poet, and teacher of Indigenous literature and creative writing for years, and I hear of what's happening across the country. I've also lived and taught in Canada, where there's an active and creative literary dynamic taking place.

Indigenous literature is Indigenous knowledge; Indigenous writers and poets are the instigators of that knowledge. You better believe it.

JMc: There's a solid body of criticism here, perhaps more than in any other issue of *The Kenyon Review*. How has the field of Native literary studies developed? What is its future?

SO: There is a good amount of literary criticism in this *KR* issue which is reflective of the current concerns of Indigenous society and culture. In other words, Indigenous peoples are concerned—worried, in other words—about the human condition (society and culture), theirs as well as that of others, especially because their condition overlaps and intersects with the larger society and culture they are a part of.

We are not separate from one another; we differ ethnically; sometimes we speak our own distinct languages; our cultures are not the same and we have our own life goals. Yet at the same time we

share the same world which is all around us. In some ways, we are not separate from one another at all; we are all part of the same general world and the same general human condition.

Critical thinking—deep thoughts and ideas about ourselves and our relationship to others, to me that's what critical thinking is—is crucial to the human condition now more than ever. As a human society and culture, we need to think about the condition of the world more than ever before. Indigenous peoples of the Americas who were and are the original human culture and society of this part of the world are deeply concerned. To me, this is the source of contemporary Indigenous literary criticism; it is concerned with addressing the condition of human society and culture.

How has the field of Native literary studies developed? Good question. First, I'll say that creative literary expression, the source of Native literary studies, has flourished in leaps and bounds. The artistic energy and spirit of Indigenous people has been boundless really, especially since the 1960s when the modern Indigenous liberation struggle or movement began to resound. Despite social, political, and economic oppression and turmoil, literary arts have flourished and flourished! Beginning in the latter 60s with N. Scott Momaday and his novel *House Made of Dawn* that was immediately followed in the 1970s with James Welch, a Blackfeet poet who later became mostly a novelist. And then Leslie Marmon Silko, also a poet, who established hereself as a brilliant novelist. And she was followed by Louise Erdrich, who has published more than a handful of well-received novels so far. At the same time, poets were led by N. Scott Momaday and James Welch, followed by me, Simon J. Ortiz, Roberta Hill, Maurice Kenny, Joseph Bruchac, Wendy Rose, Ray

Young Bear, nila northSun, Carter Revard. And who were soon followed by Joy Harjo, Adrian Louis, Nia Francisco, Luci Tapahonso, Linda Hogan, Kimberly Blaeser. And many others almost too numerous to count and name, including Allison Hedge Coke, Esther Belin, Sherwin Bitsui, Sara Ortiz, Orlando White, Jennifer Foerster, and Santee Frazier.

However, Indigenous literary criticism has lagged in development. And there are reasons for the lag. The main reason has been neglect due to lack of attention and recognition, i.e., marginalization resulting from discrimination by mainstream academia and critics. This has caused a large amount of cynicism due to self-castigation and self-distrust by Indigenous writers and scholars, compounded by a resultant lack of writing by Indigenous intellectuals with critical skills. With this issue of *KR* and its good portion of Indigenous critical writing as evidence of progress and development, I prefer to believe it is a telling sign that Indigenous literary intellectuals are committed to being a part of the discourse of aesthetic sustainability—if not the leaders of it—articulating they have a role and task in healing the human condition—society and culture—so they, as living and thriving beings, shall always be regenerative rather than degenerative!

JMc: For many Indigenous U.S. writers, English is their first language and the language in which they write. Yet, there seems to be a widespread movement to sustain and reclaim Indigenous languages. How can and do Native writers participate in that movement?

SO: I capitalize *I* when it comes to spelling and using the term *Indigenous* when it pertains to peoples who are indigenous or

aboriginal or native to the continents of the Americas, North and South America connected by Central America. All lands of this hemisphere comprise the homelands of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Prehistorically and historically. Before and after Columbus. After and before "discovery." Needless to say, English was not always the language of the nation known now as the U.S.A. Nor were Spanish, French, Portuguese, or any other European languages native to any lands in the Americas.

The original languages of the Americas—before the lands were named America—were the many, many Indigenous languages all over the continents of the Western hemisphere. However, soon after 1492, European languages became the prominent and dominant colonial languages that helped to achieve settlement, invasion, occupation—also known as conquest—of the Americas. English was introduced to North America in the 1600s along the eastern or Atlantic seaboard, although by then Spanish was already the strongest European colonial instrument of social, economic, political control and dominance in the Caribbean and North American continental lands known now as Mexico and Guatemala.

Yes, of course, English is the main language and cultural force in the U.S. Why not? No matter how hard Indigenous peoples have struggled against loss of native languages, loss has occurred undeterred. No matter how determined resistance has been waged by Indigenous peoples throughout the North, Central, and South Americas, language-cultural loss has happened. The loss has been devastating, leading to a sense of self-destruction that has grown exponentially until Indigenous peoples have become bewildered, continuously colonized, weary, hopeless.

So yes, English, in the U.S. has become the language-cultural choice that has determined the lives of Indigenous peoples. Go to reservations anywhere in the U.S., and you'll hear English as the common language. Go to almost any city, town, and village in Mexico, Central America, or South America, and the language spoken by Indigenous peoples is Spanish. There are exceptions, of course, positive ones, and you'll find Indigenous languages spoken, both in South and North America.

However, positive exceptions notwithstanding, in the U.S., English is the first language for most Indigenous writers, poets, playwrights, memoirists, and others. Why not? It is the language that has to be dealt with face to face personally, socially, and politically. Especially in the school systems and workplace, and it is being dealt with in various ways. I just heard recently that Birchbark Books, a bookstore owned by Louise Erdrich, a successful, Indigenous novelist and poet of Anishnaabe heritage, living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is publishing books written in Indigenous languages. That's a very good sign of assertion, reclaiming Indigenous language use by Indigenous peoples. Recently at a Stabilizing Indigenous Language Symposium (SILS) at Arizona State University in Spring 2009, a panel of poets presented their poetry in Indigenous languages (Navajo, Tohono O'odham, Acoma). For the past twenty-five years, American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) has offered Indigenous language courses every summer at U. of Arizona in Tucson. A dynamic Indigenous Poetry Slam high school group from Santa Fe Indian School in Santa Fe, New Mexico, features performances-presentations that vocalize Indigenous languages.

Leading Indigenous scholars-intellectuals, like Dr. Robert Warrior, Osage Nation, director of Indigenous Studies at U. of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign have committed themselves to relearning their Indigenous languages. Dr. Ofelia Zepeda, Tohono O'odham poet and professor of linguistics, and Dr. David Treuer, Ojibwe novelist and critic, write in their Indigenous languages and incorporate them into their academic works. Luci Tapahonso, Laura Tohe, Rex Lee Jim, all Navajo Nation poets, write in their Indigenous languages to an extent. In the past ten years, I've written some poetry in the Indigenous cultural language of Keres, the traditional language of Acoma Pueblo that is my home cultural community. The base and source of Indigenous languages in the U.S.A. are still Indigenous communities all across the nation which identify themselves as traditionally integral and intact because they have land bases, fairly intact governance systems, and social-cultural integrity, including Indigenous languages, even if the languages are not commonly and traditionally used much anymore.

Continual diminishment and loss of Indigenous languages is a constant concern and issue. Diminishment and loss add to the burden of Indigenous colonization because "the problem" may seem insurmountable. Valiant efforts are constantly ongoing in grassroots ways, namely self-generated tribal community projects to revitalize Indigenous languages. Personal and family dynamics result in positive gains—younger people are learning Indigenous languages to some degree. What's really missing is an activistic, vibrant, spirited, and culturally and socially engaging Indigenous consciousness movement that can energize, inspire, and vitalize more than anything else.

Indigenous language can be a strong part of this consciousness, but it doesn't have to be the only or main ingredient. In effect, language is only one part of cultural consciousness, while physical engagement and involvement in spirited activities is a bigger part of consciousness. Consider the physical movement of dancing. No words are apparent and obvious in many Indigenous dance songs; only sound and rhythm. Yet dance is emotional, intellectual, spiritual engagement. Mood and motion combine and collaborate to achieve meaning. Feeling, thinking, and being absolutely aware of our role as communal human beings within a holistic universe will do wonders for us and all of creation because that will make us be aware of sustainability as a principle of continuance. Indigenous storytellers, writers, poets have a vital role in this dynamic of continuance, and this is a big part of what is demonstrated with this present issue of *The Kenyon Review*.

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Janet McAdams is a consulting editor for *The Kenyon Review*.

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