Native American Literature and Its Place in the Inter-American Project

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Issues of Native American literature and culture are placed in a comparative and inter-American perspective, where texts from Canada, the United States, Spanish America, and Brazil are discussed and contrasted. Native American texts are analyzed in the context of inter-American literary study, which is defined as an interdisciplinary approach to the literatures of North, Central, and South America. The argument is made that Native American literature represents the cultural and historical foundation of the entire inter-American project.

KEYWORDS Americas, inter-American literature, comparative literature, Native American literature, Canada, United States, Spanish America, Brazil

Introduction

Anthropologists believe that the first Americans arrived, probably from Asia but possibly from across the Pacific Ocean, between 20,000 and 40,000 years ago. A very recent, and still quite controversial, theory posits that our ancestors could have crossed over on a great ice shelf, or bridge, that is thought to have connected the southwestern corner of Europe with the New World (Bradley & Stanford, 2004; Stanford & Bradley, 2012). By 1492, at any rate, the Americas were thoroughly peopled, from the northernmost reaches of the Arctic Circle and Canada to the cold, wind-swept barrens of the Tierra del Fuego, at the southern tip of South America, and from the sun-splashed beaches of Ipanema and the Tupi-Guarani and Tapuya people in the East to the Incan citadel of Machu Picchu along the Pacific rim in the West. Taken together, more than 2,000 languages were spoken in North and South America by at least 20 million people when the European conquest began. As we can now see, however, what the Spanish, the Portuguese, the French, and the English regarded as the ‘New World’ was, in fact, an ancient world, one rich, moreover, in its literary and cultural achievements.

For reasons, then, both historical and cultural, it can be convincingly argued that Native American literature — ancient in its oral roots and understood in its hemispheric context — forms the very foundation of the inter-American project. It is, in
a very real sense, our common American denominator. Stretching back in time
to long before the arrival of the first Europeans in the New World and yet still flourish-
ing even today, Native American literature, both oral and written, unifies the
American experience as nothing else can.² It is, in short, the oldest form of literary
expression that we have in the Americas, and that fact alone justifies its serious
comparative study. Given its fundamental importance to the field of inter-American
literary study, it is interesting to note that while in Brazil and (especially) Spanish
America Native American literature has long been part of the literary establishment,
in the United States its inclusion in the canon was long delayed, with writers like
N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko breaking through only in the 1960s (the
period, incidentally, when Latin American literature first began to gain some measure
of respect in the United States). Why, historically speaking, has the American Indian
been more accepted in the canonical literature of Latin America than in the United
States? This would seem to be the type of question an enterprising inter-Americanist
might wish to explore. At the same time, however, even a cursory consideration of
Native American history and culture reveals all that is most violent, destructive, and
bigoted in the American experience, and so the importance of its study extends far
beyond the merely literary to embrace questions of historical, social, and political
significance as well.

In the Americas, one’s understanding of Native American literature and culture
usually depends on where one lives. A Canadian, for example, will likely envision this
topic as a function of the Inuit people, the Algonquins, the Huron nation, or, farther
West, the Métis, while someone from the United States will contemplate the Iroquois
Confederation, the Sioux, the Creeks, or the Comanches. The very diversity and
profusion of Native American culture in the New World makes it a challenge to study
comparatively, and yet this very perspective is essential to this culture’s rightful place
in the larger inter-American project. For the purposes of this article, I shall concen-
trate on a discussion of Native American texts from Latin America, a vast region
I suspect is still relatively unknown to scholars better schooled in the history and
traditions of North America. It is my hope that, by proceeding in this fashion, I will
assist these scholars in their efforts to learn what the primary Native American tradi-
tions of Central and South America have to offer and, at the same time, show how
these might be integrated into more hemispherically oriented studies of this most
fundamental of inter-American realities.

With respect, then, to Latin America’s indigenous traditions, we need to recognize
that they range from the brilliance of the Aztec, the Inca, and the Maya, in what
is today regarded as Spanish America, to the less sophisticated Native American
cultures of Brazil. Historian Bradford Burns sums up this critical distinction quite
succinctly when he writes that:

The cultures of the Brazilian Indians can in no way be compared to the remarkable
civilizations of their contemporaries, the Aztecs of central Mexico, the Mayas of Yucatan
and Guatemala, and the Incas of Peru. The Brazilian Indians possessed no well-
established tribal organization; their agriculture was simple; they did not know how to
use stone to build; they lacked any animal for transportation; they had no written means
of communication. On the other hand, they had adapted well to their tropical environ-
ment, and they had much to teach the European invaders in the utilization of the land,
its rivers, its forests, and their products. (1980: 21)
As to the Native American tribe that most influenced the early Portuguese colonizers (who, in contrast to their Spanish counterparts, found little or no gold and rarely left the beaches to penetrate the jungle and the interior), scholars agree that it was the nomadic and forest dwelling Tupi-Guarani who emerged, during the colonial period, as the most important. While the Native American tradition in Brazil has been, and, to a degree, still is, significant (the case of the 1865 novel *Iracema* stands out, as do the later texts *Macunaima*, *Martim Cererê*, *Cobra Norato*, *Quarup*, and *Maira*, among others), it must be said that it is not as much a living, breathing part of daily life as it is this same tradition in such Spanish American nations as Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru. In Brazil, one is tempted to say, the Native American tradition is more written about than lived out by the general population, as it is in these, and other, Spanish American nations. In this sense, the Brazilian historical experience, *vis-à-vis* our Indian heritages, might offer an unusually viable comparison with the cultural situation in the United States. At the same time, there is no doubt that our greatest New World writers, whether from French- and English-speaking Canada, the United States, the Caribbean, Spanish America, or Brazil, have all recognized the importance of our Native American heritage. The case of Brazil is interesting, however, because while it cannot boast of Pre-Columbian civilizations as magnificent as those of the Aztec, the Maya, and the Inca, it has nonetheless long cultivated its indigenous past in a plethora of narratives, poems, and dramas.

For generations of American writers, the Indian, in one form or another, has been a staple of New World literature. We know, for example, that even Borges, who taught American literature at the University of Buenos Aires, was keenly interested in Native American poetry, as was Brazil’s Machado de Assis, whose 1875 collection of poems, *Americanas*, presented the Native American as a sign of our essential hemispheric unity, our common origin. We know, too, that James Fenimore Cooper was widely read in Canada and in both Spanish America and Brazil (though José de Alencar, who praised Cooper’s skill as a writer of sea stories, adamantly denied his Indianist influence on his own work; see Driver, 1968: 106–08; Mautner Wasserman, 1994: 154–219). Regardless of how we approach it, the study of Native American culture stands, solidly but restively, at the heart of the inter-American paradigm.

The texts

Yet when one applies a comparative lens to Native American literature in the Americas, certain texts, along with certain themes and motifs, begin to stand out. One of these texts, the *Rabinal Achi* (the ‘Man of Rabinal’), is, arguably, the oldest known Pre-Columbian work in the Americas that is known to be authentically indigenous and whose dialogue was, and is (when performed today), in a Mayan language. Since it was being performed long before the arrival of the Spanish, this Mayan dance-drama is a work that carries with it a unique historical importance. ‘Considered as a dramatization of Mayan history,’ Dennis Tedlock explains, ‘Rabinal Achi is mainly concerned with a series of events that reached a climax in the early fifteenth century’, a period of time well in advance of the *conquistadores*, the first of the European powers to arrive in the New World (2003: 1). But, as Tedlock cautions us, when the *Rabinal Achi* ‘is considered as a representation of Mayan culture, and the culture of Mayan royalty in particular, it reaches much deeper’ into the Mayan past, all the way...
back, in fact, to ‘what archaeologists call the Classic period, running from the fourth through the tenth centuries’ (1–2). Involving conflict between sophisticated city-states and built around the motif of ritual sacrifice, the *Rabinal Achi* is also pervaded by a powerful sense of fatalism, which, for Tedlock, is a theme that permeates the literature of indigenous Mesoamerica. In terms of inter-American literary history, then, the *Rabinal Achi* stands out for being not necessarily the oldest Native American text, or performance, we have but the oldest one about which we can speak with some degree of confidence as to its autochthonous authenticity.

A book of similar importance, and one widely regarded by Latin Americanists as the most important and influential compendium of sixteenth-century Mayan history, mythology, and culture is the *Popol Vuh*, the original manuscript of which, replete with its hieroglyphic characters, has been lost. What we know about this seminal text, often referred to as the ‘Bible of Indigenous America’ (see Arias-Larreta, 1967a: 100; 1967b: 63, n. 7; Bancroft, 1886: 42; Morley & Goetz, 1950: ix, 81–82), stems from the translation to Spanish done by Father Francisco Ximénez (1666–1729), and so the issue of what was lost and what was added in the process of translation must be considered. In the form with which we work today, however, the *Popol Vuh* seems to divide itself into two fairly distinct parts; the first part, paralleling the creation myth of the Bible, concerns itself primarily with the gods and their interests in creating men and women to inhabit the earth, while the second deals with the conception of the twins, Hunahpú and Xbalanqué, and their virgin mother, Xquic. As is clear from reading the *Popol Vuh*, one could easily organize a course or a research project around the nature and use of the creation myth in Native cultures of North, Central, and South America.

And, of course, no discussion of Native American literature and culture in the Americas would be complete without a reference to Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s dramatic history of the epic struggle between the Spanish conquistadores and the warriors of the powerful Aztec nation, *La historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (1632). A riveting battle-by-battle account, and written in an engaging and unadorned style by one of Cortés’s soldiers, the *True History* can easily be read as emblematic of the entire clash of civilizations that characterized the European conquest of the New World. Although Bernal Díaz’s *True History* is a gripping account as told by a soldier engaged in the fighting, the fate of the greatly outnumbered Spanish forces, along with that of their determined Aztec foes, actually turns, as epochal battles so often do, on the question of communication. And in the struggle to the death between these two great warrior cultures the question of communication boiled down to the availability, to the Spanish, of trustworthy translators, an issue that allows for the issue of gender to leaven what would otherwise be an overwhelmingly martial narrative. So important a player in the outcome of the conflict did Bernal Díaz regard the young Indian woman, known, after baptism, to the Spanish forces as Doña Marina, that the entirety of Chapter 37 is devoted to her. To this day both venerated and reviled by Mexicans as ‘La Malinche’, the critical importance of this woman and all she represents to the sense of identity that modern Mexicans, men and women alike, have of themselves is, as Octavio Paz has suggested, both complex and painful, simultaneously a cry of battle and of outrage and humiliation (1961: 65–88; see especially 80–81, 86).
Serving as a kind of eloquent and moving counterpart to Castillo’s *History* is *La vision de los vencidos* (1959; The Broken Spears, 1962), a compilation of accounts from Aztec descendents that, organized by renowned scholar Miguel León-Portilla, tell the other side of the story, that of the conquered indigenous peoples. Eerily reminiscent of historian Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1971), *La vision de los vencidos* presents the destruction of the American Indian not from the perspective of the winners but from that of the defeated Indians themselves. In reading this narrative of defeat and violation, one is struck by the degree to which Aztec theology handicapped its military forces, which enjoyed an overwhelming numerical superiority. For the Aztecs, war existed primarily not for political or ideological purposes but to secure captives who would then be used as sacrifices to appease the powerful god Huitzilopochtli, who controlled the fate of the Aztec people. On several occasions, the Aztecs could, seemingly, have annihilated the Spanish forces but failed to do so, it is thought, because they were less committed to killing the enemy than to taking him captive. A decisive difference, then, between the two texts, and one that speaks to a deeper and darker distinction between the seventeenth-century English Protestant and fifteenth-century Spanish Catholic approach to the New World Indian question, is that while the culture Brown describes is essentially obliterated (in a way that, for Latin Americanists, recalls Juan Zorrilla de San Martín’s 1886 prose poem, *Tabaré*), the one chronicled by León-Portilla survived and, in fact, has lived on, re-establishing itself, finally, as a still vital heritage for modern Mexico. This may partially explain why, in the English lexicon, the word ‘half-breed’ is so cruel and divisive while the term ‘mestizo’ serves, in modern Mexico and Central America and in the Andean nations, as a much less derogatory and more accepted term. Indeed, Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, whose father was a Spanish capitán and whose mother was a member of the Incan royal family, and who, as in his canonical *Comentarios reales*, celebrated both of his traditions, is still venerated as the ‘founding father’ of Spanish American literature (Rodríguez Monegal, 1977: 67).

Still, one would be wrong to conclude from this that racial mixing is regarded in the same way in Spanish America and Brazil. It is not, and this is an important point to bear in mind as one works with this very basic inter-American theme. It is also important to remember that, while Brazil, an enormous nation, larger, in terms of square miles, than the continental United States, has long existed with its current borders more or less intact and which has a variety of powerful, coherent, and cohesive national literary traditions, Spanish America became balkanized in the wars for independence in the early nineteenth century, splintered into a number of separate nation-states with different histories and cultures. Some of these Spanish-speaking nations view the Indian and both racial and cultural mixing favourably, while others, Argentina, Uruguay, and even Peru for example, take a less sanguine and more racist view, one in which mestizaje sometimes becomes code for a desire to eradicate the Indian part within a person of mixed racial heritage. This somewhat schizophrenic approach to Native American literature has led to two terms that have long had currency in critical discussions regarding Spanish American literary history and its strong, self-conscious, and quite vital tradition of Native American literature: *Indianismo*, the more romantic and celebratory of the two, and *Indigenismo*, the more socially
conscious and politically engaged and, as we shall see, the term that lends itself to the current debate in Canada over the question of miscegenation.7

Zorrilla’s text, in fact, illustrates quite well the essential difference between these two Spanish American traditions. In Tabaré, for some the national epic of Uruguay (though it is more elegiac than epical in nature), the protagonist, in all respects an Indian save for his blue eyes, is of mixed blood, and for Zorrilla, an ardent nationalist, this is the fatal flaw in the tragedy that is to be depicted. The young man in question, Tabaré, though baptized, was reared as an Indian. With his father being a Charrúa chief and his mother a Spanish captive, the irreconcilable problem for Tabaré is that he is ‘mestizo’ and so unable to marry the white girl whom he loves. For the author, in a way that recalls the dilemma Cooper faced at the conclusion of The Last of the Mohicans, Tabaré must, in the end, die, which he does, dispatched by the girl’s father, a Spanish captain bent on protecting his daughter. Although Uruguay will revere its Indian past, it will develop as a modern political state, Zorrilla implies at the conclusion of his poem, largely without it:

Ya Tabaré, a los hombres,
ese postrer ensueño
no contará jamás . . . Está callado,
callado para siempre, como el tiempo
como su raza,
como el desierto,
como tumba que el muerto ha abandonado.
¡Boca sin lengua, eternidad sin cielo!

(Englekirk et al., 1968: 284)

[Now Tabaré will, to men,
that final dream
never recount . . . He is silent,
silent forever, like time
like his race,
like the desert,
like a tomb the dead one has abandoned.
A mouth without a tongue, an eternity without a heaven!]

(Translated by the author)

In addition to the canonical Tabaré, a number of other Spanish American texts of the period take up this same theme, that of the struggle between the Spanish and the many different Native American civilizations they encountered. In Mexico, Eligio Ancona’s 1866 novel, La cruz y la espada, stands out, though for many ‘the most successful of the novels on Indian themes’ (Franco, 1969: 83) was Enriquillo (1882), by Manuel de Jesús Galván, of Santo Domingo. Here, the protagonist is a young man and once again he is involved in a problematic relationship with a young woman, Mencía, who, half-Indian and half-Spanish, is his cousin. In terms of its characterizations and plot structure, Galván’s novel offers some intriguing parallel with Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans, where the heroic Indian warrior, Uncas, is cast as being enamored of dark-haired Cora, whose (slightly) mixed (read: ‘tainted’) blood makes her more acceptable as a mate for her Native American champion. Although
Enriquillo and Mencía eventually wed, they also fall prey to a cruel Spanish master who seeks to enslave Enriquillo and make his young wife his concubine. Aggrieved, and thirsting for freedom and justice (if not vengeance), Enriquillo leads a successful Indian revolt against their Spanish overlords. In the end, however, and as if in recognition of the new power structure that has been imposed, he acquiesces to the arguments in favor of re-submitting to Spanish rule presented to him by the famous protector of the Indians, Father Bartolomé de Las Casas. Merging the beauty and majesty of the land with a love for freedom, Enriquillo serves, for many readers, as the quintessential romantic hero, though for others, the inherent contradiction between his oft-proclaimed quest for freedom and his submission to both Catholicism and Spanish authority is what most marks this still widely read Spanish American masterpiece.

Yet if the parallel with Cooper is plausible in Enriquillo, it is all but explicit in Juan León Mera’s novel, Cumandá, ou un drama entre salvajes (1879). An Ecuadorian writer, Mera was influenced by both Cooper and, perhaps even more deeply, by Chateaubriand, whose impact in both Spanish America and Brazil was profound and far reaching. Basing his plot, as the Brazilian, Alencar, would do in Iracema, on a legend from colonial times, Mera develops his tale around a monk, José Domingo Orozco, who entered a religious order after his family was murdered (except for his son, Carlos) by marauding Indians. The parallels with Alencar’s hemispherically symbolic narrative continue, moreover, in that the main female character, a young Indian maiden, Cumandá, not only falls in love with Carlos but, as the warrior-princess, Iracema, does for Martim, her Portuguese mate (and eventual husband), saves his life on numerous occasions, something Cora was never called upon to do for Uncas. In the end, though, their love, in striking contrast to what happens in Iracema, cannot come to fruition, for it is discovered late in the novel that Cumandá is actually a baptized Catholic with Spanish blood pulsing through her veins and, even worse, the daughter of Orozco and the sister of Carlos (Franco, 1969: 86)!

But there is an even more significant distinction between Iracema and Cumandá, and it has to do with the point of the deaths of the two young women. In the Brazilian text (a prose poem), the hero is a young Indian woman who excels at the arts of war but who, for Alencar, must die in childbirth, albeit under circumstances that clearly make her, and all she represents, the ‘great mother’ of all later Brazilians and of Brazil as a mixed-race and gender-conscious nation of the future. Iracema, moreover, is never baptized, and her marriage to Martim not only takes place in accordance with the customs and laws of her people but is also designed and executed according to her wishes. Martim, indeed, can be said to play a distinctly passive role in their relationship and in their marriage. Iracema, however, dies giving birth to their child, a boy who is given the Indian name, Moacir, which means ‘child of pain’. This mixed-race, mixed-culture offspring symbolizes the Brazilian people and the future of their nation; it becomes, in essence, emblematic of what modern Brazil will be.

This same mixed-culture also reminds us of the difference between a ‘usable’ past and a legitimate and authentic native past that, as we see in so many cases in New World literature, recounts the tragic story of a decimated people whose all-too-real past has been eradicated, appropriated, or debased by others. This consideration of the difference between a culture’s ‘usable’ past and a native past (one that is depicted, or recreated, in a historically honest fashion) links a seminal work like William
Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain* with a number of similar texts from Canada, Spanish America, and Brazil where an attempt is made to embrace our native past in a spirit of authenticity, justice, and clear-eyed communion.

In Mera’s narrative, to return to the comparison with the Brazilian text, *Iracema*, the young woman, Cumandá, also dies, and under tragic circumstances, but here it is to no good end; she will produce no progeny. Death wins out over life. As contrived as this all is for the Spanish American author, it is not surprising since, ‘As a supporter of the bigoted Catholic theocratic dictator of Ecuador, García Moreno, Mera’, like Cooper, it might be argued, but unlike Alencar, ‘could hardly accept the full implications of the noble savage theory which postulated the goodness of natural man’ (Franco, 1969: 86). So while, as Paz argues (and, as we shall see, in contrast to Puritan Protestantism), Spanish Catholicism did by and large offer the Indian a spot in its theological scheme of things, this was not always to the Native’s advantage, as sometimes simple bigotry won out over religious compassion.

Closely related, of course, to the question of miscegenation, both biological and cultural (see Kaup & Rosenthal, 2002), is the question of gender, which, as it relates to Native American literature in the Americas, could also serve as the focus of an engaging course or research project. As noted above, Brazilian literature, since the time of *Iracema*, cultivates this theme, as do other of our American literatures, including that of the United States. From Canada, for example, we have the fascinating example of Yves Thériault, who, a speaker of Cree, was himself of Montagnais ancestry. A canonical figure in modern Québec culture, Thériault gained international celebrity as well with the publication, in 1958, of *Agaguk*, a powerful novel of the Inuit Indians in Canada’s frozen north. The novel’s basic story line focuses on the physical and psychological development of the male protagonist, Agaguk, who lives in conflict with the ways of his father and his ancient culture, but also with an ever encroaching white culture and the harsh arctic environment. Yet, the most captivating figure in the novel is his strong-willed wife, Iriook. For gender-conscious readers, Iriook stands out not so much for ‘civilizing’ her husband, which she does, but for her ferocity, her fearlessness, and her unabashed sexuality. For readers versed in Brazilian literature, the parallels between *Iracema* and *Agaguk* are legion. Like the warrior-princess, Iracema, for example, Iriook twice steps in to save the life of her mate, and, as in the Brazilian novel, the Inuit woman must effectively turn her back on her own people to live her own life. There are, of course, key differences as well. In the Canadian novel, the climax comes when Iriook defies her still culture-bound husband and, at gunpoint, demands that he not kill their infant daughter and that he accept her and help nurture her into adulthood. The text strongly implies that, in defense of her daughter and her own outlook, Iriook will kill her husband if she has to, that is, if he will not accept her radically new way of thinking. Because Agaguk, having been transformed by his wife’s political views and liberated by her transforming sexuality, is able to do this, the three of them, two women and a man, will go forward together. In *Iracema*, as we have seen, the fearless woman warrior, who will attack her own people in defense of her mate, dies in childbirth, and it is her mixed-race son and (one can feel) her culturally and sexually transformed husband who go forward together to found the new Brazil.

For literary purposes, Native American literature can be studied in either of two basic ways, either by itself, as a particular kind of literary expression, or as part of a
more systematically comparative approach to New World letters, one that, thanks to
the work done by a number of skilled translators and scholars, now includes authors,
performances, and texts from North, Central, and South America. This is a point
made some time ago by the celebrated Mexican poet, intellectual, and diplomat,
Octavio Paz, who has argued that while the United States has, historically speaking,
defined itself largely on the strength of the destruction and suppression of its Native
American heritage, Latin America (not free, lamentably, of its own tradition of
exploiting the American Indian) has also been more receptive to incorporating Native
American culture into the mainstream. Expanding this theme to Brazil, Samuel
Putnam contends that, while for ‘North Americans the Indian was always more or
less an enemy against whom it was necessary to defend oneself, one’s women and
children, and who was to be driven back and exterminated’, in Brazil, even more than
in Spanish America, ‘racial assimilation’ was regarded as a natural and effective
means of achieving an authentic sense of ‘national unity’ (1948: 9). ‘With the
Portuguese colonizer,’ concludes Putnam, ‘it was assimilation, with the English,
annihilation for the native encountered on these shores’ (9). As Brian Swann has
noted (expanding on Paz’s theory), ‘while Mexico is the most Spanish country in
Latin America, it is also the most Indian’, whereas in the United States the Native
American presence is, even today, close to ‘invisible’ (1983: xv–xvi). While one could
debate the aptness of Swann’s use of the word, ‘invisible’, here, what is not in doubt
is that Spanish America and the United States do differ, and profoundly so, I would
argue, with respect to their regard for Native American culture and tradition. To put
this another way, while Mexico (and, to a degree, Latin America in general) has
grafted its modern sense of self onto its native traditions, the United States has sought,
almost without exception, to eradicate its own indigenous past. As Paz, an acute
and perceptive inter-Americanist, observes, ‘one of the most persistent themes in
American literature from Melville and Thoreau to Faulkner, from Whitman to
William Carlos Williams, has been the search for (or invention of) American roots’
(1979: 140), and the comparative study of our common but far from identical Native
American heritages in the Americas is already casting new light on this venerable New
World theme.

With respect to comparisons between the Native American heritage of Mexico and
that of the United States, the case of Paz is particularly significant because he spent
much of his long and illustrious career moving between these two American nations
and studying their respective histories and cultures. In 1943, for example, in the midst
of World War II, Paz received a Guggenheim Fellowship to travel and study in the
United States. The result of this sojourn was the publication, in 1950, of El laberinto
de soledad (1961, The Labyrinth of Solitude), a text that, though focusing on the
hybrid figure of the pachuco, or Mexican-American, seeks to examine the Mexican
character by comparing and contrasting it with Mexico’s often troubled relationship
with the United States. And basic to Paz’s trenchant commentary on this complex
relationship is the question of Native American culture and how it has fared,
historically speaking, since the time of the Spanish and the English conquerors. For
Paz, the original problem was essentially religious in nature. As the Mexican writer
and intellectual saw it, English Protestantism in the early seventeenth century was
‘exclusivist’, or ‘exclusionist’, and a religious system that sought to keep the Indian
out, whereas Spanish Catholicism was, in Paz’s view, much more ‘inclusive’ in its
approach to this question and, in fact, offered the Indian not only some degree
of protection from abuse and exploitation but also various forms of ‘inclusion’, or
agency, in the formation of national identity (Paz, 1979: 143). As Paz, no innocent
dreamer on this matter, argues in The Labyrinth of Solitude: ‘It is quite clear that
the reason the Spaniards did not exterminate the Indians was that they needed their
labor for the cultivation of the vast haciendas and the exploitation of the mines. The
Indians were goods that should not be wasted’ (1961: 102). Then, arguing that the
Catholic Church, which had made Spain the driving force behind its Counter-
Reformation, stood between the Spanish colonizers and the New World Native Americans,
Paz makes this telling comparison with what transpired in the United States:

This possibility of belonging to a living order, even if it was at the bottom of the social
pyramid, was cruelly denied to the Indians by the Protestants of New England. It is often
forgotten that to belong to the Catholic faith meant that one found a place in the cosmos.
The flight of their gods and the death of their leaders had left the natives in a solitude so
complete that it is difficult for modern man to imagine it. (1961: 102)

Whether studied by itself or as part of a larger, more comparatively hemispheric
approach, Native American literature has a great deal to tell us about our notions of
literary genres, periodization, thematics, translation, and literary theory.

Even ‘magical realism’, a term so closely identified with Spanish American narra-
tive from the 1960s, can be said to relate organically to key aspects of the Native
American oral tradition. As Tedlock observes (referring to the English-language tra-
dition and seeming to use the word ‘primitive’ as an antonym to the modes of Western
realism), ‘while most of our prose narrative is highly “realistic”, primitive narrative
is full of fantasy: a stone moves about like an animal, an animal speaks like a man,
a man jumps through a hoop and becomes a coyote’ (1983: 71). The step from what
Tedlock describes here to what takes place in a text like Gabriel García Márquez’s
Cien años de soledad (1967; One Hundred Years of Solitude, 1970) is a very short
one, as it is to the ‘magical realist’ Indian texts of Nobel Prize-winning Guatemalan
author, Miguel Ángel Asturias. In works like Hombres de maíz (1949; Men of Maize,
1975), Mulata de tal (1963; Mulata, 1967), Clarivigilia primaveral (1965, Springtime
Vigil), Maladrón (1969, Bad Thief), and Tres de cuatro soles (1977, Three of Four
Suns), Asturias, of Indian and white ancestry, writes of fantastic and non-realistic
events, magical transformations, and a ‘primitive’, mythic world ruled by natural
forces, dreams and premonitions, temporal suspension, and the doings of a variety of
trickster-like animals. While studying American Indian culture (especially that of
the Maya) at the Sorbonne, Asturias came to believe that there existed a deep and
fundamental difference between white European rationalism (with its emphasis on
objectivity and, above all, domination or control) and what he felt was the Native
American’s (and most particularly the Maya’s) intuitive, mythic, non-rational, and
non-controlling perception of reality and the natural world.

The case of Asturias is particularly instructive because, as with such other Ameri-
can writers as Alencar, Vallejo, Arguedas, Cooper, and Silko, it highlights the differ-
ence between the field known as ‘Native American literary study’, which admits both
Indians and non-Indians alike, and ‘Native American literature’, which, as a field, is
more commonly restricted to writers who can legitimately claim Native American
ancestry. As we know, this question — who is, and who is not, legitimately of Native
American ancestry — is a complex and divisive one. If one wishes to claim Native American identity (the case, in Canada, of ‘Grey Owl’, an Englishman living in Saskatchewan named Archibald Stansfeld Belaney, may be taken as prototypical), is it a matter of ‘blood’ or ‘culture’ (Fitz, 2002; Kaup & Rosenthal, 2002)? Is it more a question of one’s personal affinity for the ways of a specific group, their ontologies, and their epistemological systems of thought or a matter of DNA, blood quantum, and biology?

And, to further complicate an already complicated question, we have the revolutionary new work being done by geneticists, who, in studying the human genome, have discovered that there are roughly as many differences between our so-called races as there are within them, which basically debunks all our old notions about ‘race’ and ‘racial difference’ (see Tilghman, 2011) and which shows them to be much more issues of politics, religion, economics, and simple prejudice than they are ‘racial’, as this term is now understood in its scientific context.

With respect to ‘periodization’, another very productive comparative approach to the study of Native American literature, it is quite revealing (and largely for reasons of politics) to compare and contrast the ways in which the image of the ‘Indian’ was used as a metaphor in the process of creating national identities in the literatures of French- and English-speaking Canada, the United States, Spanish America, and Brazil during the nineteenth century, and most especially during the Romantic period. As if to highlight the historical and cultural differences between Brazil and Spanish America, in Brazil this usage of the Indian and that nation’s indigenous past was, as in the poetry of Gonçalves Dias, the driving force in the initial phase of Brazilian Romanticism, whereas in Spanish America the Indian did not play this same role until Romanticism’s final stages (Merquior, 1996: 366–67). Also telling are the deep cultural differences between the mythically ‘foundational’ Brazilian novel *Iracema* (1865), and Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), with the rigidly ‘separatist’ Puritan Protestant heritage of Cooper thrown into sharp contrast with the more malleable, more assimilative Luso-Brazilian Catholic heritage of Alencar.

Something similar occurs during the first three decades of the twentieth century, when the Indian once again returns to play a crucial role in the definition of national identity in Latin America. We see this repeatedly in Brazil, with works like *Macunaima*, *Cobra Norato*, and *Martim Cererê*, where it appears to be a more or less direct response to the ideas being promulgated by Freud and Jung about totems and the nature of so-called primitive cultures.

In Spanish America, where this same return-to-the-Indian movement is not as strong, one writer does stand out, the Peruvian poet and activist, César Vallejo. Sometimes thought of as the poetic equivalent of his compatriot, José María Arguedas, Vallejo, too, uses the Peruvian Indian, the descendent of the great Incan empire, as the focal point of his work. Vallejo’s marvelous collection of poems, *Los heraldos negros* (1918, *The Black Heralds*), shows the extent to which Quechua and Incan culture, history, and mythology are now forming the basis of the poet’s entire vision, and critique, of modern human existence.

For the inter-Americanist, however, the question that demands to be asked is this: how does what was being written in Canada, Spanish America, and Brazil during this
same period (the early decades of the twentieth century) compare with the Native American literature that was being written, produced, and discussed in the United States, where such texts as *In the American Grain*, Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark*, and Harte Crane’s *The Bridge* all touch on this topic? What, if any, are the cultural, historical, or visionary differences involved? Additionally, one wishes to know to what extent the Native literature that was produced and discussed in the Americas at this time was able to enter into the discourse on our respective national identities. What were the critical, aesthetic, and cultural issues that were in play? These questions would seem to offer exceptionally fertile ground for further inter-American study. It is at this point, at any rate, that we can begin to appreciate how and why the Brazilian experience, stemming from its worldly, commercial, and adaptable Portuguese ancestry, differs so markedly from not only that of the United States but also from that of Spanish America as well.

In looking at the question of miscegenation and the Native American experience in the New World from an inter-American perspective, it is possible, in trying to identify some basic characteristics, to argue that while the United States represents one extreme and Brazil the other, English Canada and Spanish America oscillate between the two while French Canada tends to develop in ways that run closer to the Brazilian model. In the United States, for example, with its long-standing ‘one drop rule’, the acceptability of racially mixed people is, even now, a difficult concept for many to accept. Indeed, interracial marriage was, until the 1960s, technically illegal in much of the United States.

This explains why, in Silko’s *Ceremony*, the struggle of its protagonist, a mixed-blood Laguna Indian and World War II veteran named Tayo, to negotiate the two largely antithetical worlds in which he lives involves basic questions of both ‘race’ (the opposition of ‘Indian’ to ‘white’) and culture, with the latter by far the most important element. As Silko presents it, Tayo’s battle to overcome the demons that torment him and to find peace and harmony in his life once again is largely a matter of to what degree the life-affirming ‘good stories’ of his Native American heritage can overcome the life-destroying ‘evil stories’ that are promoted by so much of the shallow, meretricious, and unhealthy consumer culture that engulfs us all.

A similar challenge lies at the heart of Momaday’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1966). This powerful yet poignant narrative, a heady mixture of poetry and prose, reaffirms the healing power of both stories and the oral tradition. But it also reaffirms their raw material, a shared belief in the sacred Word, the very thing so corrupted by the sham, hypocrisy, and seemingly endless mendacity of contemporary society. Like the main character in *Ceremony*, the protagonist of *House Made of Dawn* is a World War II veteran, Abel (the biblical name is significant), who, as a young Native American man, returns home from a foreign war seeking peace but finds, instead, that he is still judged to be a pariah and that his personal struggle is only beginning. Caught between two worlds, the traditional Indian one, in which he, albeit spiritually lost, still exists as a living part of the land, the changing seasons, and his sacred stories, and the ‘dead’ one, the one manifested by the crassness, exploitation, and control obsessed violence of modern culture and its destructive lifestyle of dissipation, deceit, and self-loathing. At the conclusion of this wrenching novel, we find Abel if not yet healed then at least conscious of the difficult choices he must
make if he wishes to be healed and of the importance his Native American traditions will have in his healing process.

Thematically, too, the differences between these, and many other New World texts of the same period, are profound, with none being more contentious than the issue of racial mixing, or miscegenation. As we know, interracial sexual congress is strongly hinted at (for purposes of titillation, one supposes) but ultimately shunned in Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* but openly and resolutely celebrated in the Brazilian text *Iracema*, where it also stands, quite unambiguously, as the essential characteristic of Brazil’s future development as a nation, a culture, and a people. Indeed, one could argue that the entire history of relations between Native Americans and Europeans in the Americas is built upon miscegenation, and one can easily imagine a compelling course being built around it.

If one were to construct such a course, however, it would be essential to consider how and why the theme of miscegenation has, in twenty-first century Canadian letters, come to be a newly contentious issue for Native American writers. Although this theme has existed in Canadian letters virtually since their beginning, it is only now, when so many First Nations peoples in Canada are seeking to solidify their own identities along with their social, political, and economic rights, that it has generated these hitherto unknown levels of discord. Commenting on the nationalist approach in Native Canadian letters, an approach that contends that ‘Native literature and its study should benefit Native communities’, Fagan and McKegney note that it ‘is perhaps not surprising that nationalist criticism has sometimes been particularly directed at writers of mixed descent’ (2008: 40), who have been accused of being ‘marginal appropriators’ promoting ‘an assimilationist agenda’ (Taiaiake Alfred, quoted by Fagan & McKegney, 2008: 40). Making a similar argument is Lakota writer, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who finds the ‘mixed-blood literary movement’ to be ‘personal, invented, appropriated, and irrelevant to First Nation status’ (quoted by Fagan & McKegney, ibid). And, finally, Canadian critic Amaryll Chanady finds that in Canadian literature ‘miscegenation is generally represented in a negative manner’, whereas in what she describes as Latin American literature (she does not consider Brazil, however) she also believes that ‘mestizos’ and the literature they have produced ‘have entered the national imaginary as an important paradigm of postindependence identity’ (2010: 99).

Thomas King’s novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (1994) would seem to exemplify all these issues, not only as they define modern Canada but also as they speak to the larger Native American experience in the Americas. King’s two primary characters are Lionel Red Dog, a Blackfoot who makes his living selling stereos and televisions in an electronics store, and his uncle Eli, who is a literature professor at the prestigious University of Toronto. As King sets it up, Lionel and Eli are Indians who, now anxious and unhappy, fear that by having ‘gone white’ and by ‘making it’ in the market-driven world of non-Native Canada, they have had to forfeit their Indian identities — and that, as a consequence, they are now neither ‘white’ nor ‘Indian’. If Lionel’s story is essentially comic in nature, Eli’s is not, for, in a kind of symbolic but painful ‘last stand’, he will seek to return to his native roots by trying to prevent a dam from being built on reservation property. Apropos, sadly, his ‘white’ education, however, Eli finds that he has become merely a kind of fatuous and bastardized Indian Thoreau and that, even more painful (and evoking another
American author, Thomas Wolfe), he cannot really ‘go back home again’ to the reservation. King’s novel would thus seem to encapsulate the debate currently being carried out in Canada with respect to the place of Native American writers, and writing, in the national discourse over identity, belonging, and miscegenation, both biological and cultural. Chanady, at any rate, offers a comparison between Canadian and what she calls ‘Latin American writing’ (2010):

> Whereas the new collective subject in Spanish-language texts has frequently been conceptualized in terms of the symbolic appropriation of the indigene or the amalgamation of the indigene and the white Creole in a new hybrid nation, the symbolic integration of the indigene in the Canadian postcolonial subject has been much more difficult, and miscegenation has never become a central trope for an emerging collective identity. (101)

By not including Brazil in her discussion, however, and by restricting her comparison to comments made by the Cuban writer José Martí alone, Chanady’s otherwise very useful essay finds itself forced to produce an incomplete picture of the various ways in which miscegenation, cultural as well as biological, has played a role in the creation of our myriad New World identities.

A prime example of this identity-formation is the Peruvian poet and novelist, José María Arguedas, who, as a young man, had hoped to establish himself as a writer by working in Quechua alone. Indeed, nearly all of his poetry was written in Quechua, a language that he found inherently lyrical and philosophic and one that, even today, is spoken by millions of people in the nations of the Andean region of South America. The mestizaje of Arguedas, so crucial to his creativity, reveals itself in nearly all of his verse and in prose works like his powerful and poetic novel, *Los ríos profundos* (1958; *Deep Rivers*, 1979), as a vital (if often conflicted) function of both Spanish and Quechua. More specifically, Arguedas sought to overlay a distinctly Quechua syntax with Spanish diction, a linguistic, cultural, and ontological fusion that is at least partially recreated in Frances Horning Barraclough’s brilliant English translation. The troubled story of the novel’s young protagonist, Ernesto, a boy lost between two worlds and epistemological systems, closely parallels that of the author, who, tragically, committed suicide in 1969. Read in the context of the argument Chanady makes, and in the context of the different roles miscegenation has played in Brazil and Spanish America (which, far from monolithic and uniform, subdivides into a number of Spanish-speaking cultures with very different histories), the poetry and fiction of a writer like Arguedas could make a significant contribution to a course on this bedrock American subject (see Fitz, 1991, 2002). Any conclusions we might draw about the role played by miscegenation and its impact on Native Americans in the literatures of North, Central, and South America would, of course, be of prime importance in our hypothetical course on this topic; indeed, it would be the point of the entire operation. And it would afford the student and scholar a wealth of diverse texts, cultural readings, and systems of thought to consider.

The course would be immensely enriched by the inclusion of Brazil, of course, which, though it has numerous points of contact with Spanish America, should always be read as having a very different, distinctive, and unique history of development, one that owes a great deal to the very great cultural, historical, political, and economic differences that existed between Spain and Portugal in 1492 and 1500, the
years when these two European powers first arrived, definitively, in the Americas. Owing to their long history of overseas commerce, which saw them marry into local communities all over the globe, the Portuguese arrived in the New World with a much more flexible sense of race, race relations, and cultural constructs than did their more martial Spanish cousins, who would, very soon after 1492, become preoccupied with questions of racial, religious, and cultural ‘purity’, a fateful decision that would lead to their demise as a world power. This less fraught acceptance of racial mixing involving both Native Americans and Africans (imported, of course, as slaves) would, therefore, make miscegenation a basic characteristic of even colonial Brazilian society. Historian Bradford Burns, echoing Putnam and others, argues that ‘there appeared almost at once’ in Brazil ‘a “new race”, the mameluco or caboclo, a blend of European and Indian well adapted physically and psychologically to the land’ (1980: 44). This same affinity for racial mixing would soon involve Europeans and Indians, but also the Africans (see Haberly, 1983) who were brought to the New World to comprise the labor force that, for the Brazilians (in contrast to the Spaniards), the Native American population did not adequately provide.

If one were to include Deep Rivers in our hypothetical course on Native American literature in the New World, and if one wished to integrate Brazil into it, then Darcy Ribeiro’s award-winning novel Maíra18 (1978) might well be a good text to select for the reading list. With its author a professional anthropologist, as was Arguedas, Maíra, like Deep Rivers, tells the disturbing tale of a young man torn between two worlds and unable to find, or create for himself, a secure, satisfying sense of identity. Born a Mairun Indian but baptized and reared as a Portuguese-speaking Brazilian Catholic, Isaías reverts to his Mairun name and identity as Avá, but he is still unable to find harmony and peace. In a way that personifies the predicament of the Native American in terms of their relationship with mainstream white society, he, too, is unable to ‘go home again’. Maíra, however, goes beyond Deep Rivers in that it serves as a metaphor for the entire post-1492 Native American experience; that is, it stands as a searing indictment of the many ways the insatiable demands of modern consumer societies have destroyed or compromised our surviving indigenous cultures. At the same time, however, it asks if this very process of assimilation (what the Brazilians, referencing, perhaps, the distinctly commercial nature of their Portuguese colonization, have long referred to as the natural import and export of culture in the international marketplace) is not our natural fate as global citizens. Whereas in Deep Rivers the tragedy is more personal, and more poignant, in Maíra the same conflict over the question of one’s identity makes the step from the personal to the public, or political, sphere. In this sense, what is only implicit in the Peruvian novel is made more explicit in the Brazilian one.

While it is a moot point as to whether the contemporary Canadian situation, where the question of Native claims is so politically charged, has a counterpart in the United States and Latin America, what we can say is that, literarily and culturally speaking, racial mixing is a deeply-rooted reality in the nations of Spanish America and Brazil. In Brazil, for example, we have the aforementioned Iracema, Alencar’s mid-nineteenth century paean to racial mixing as exemplifying Brazil’s future as a modern nation state. And at what we might think of as representing the opposite pole, we have Cooper’s foundational novel, The Last of the Mohicans, which, as
many critics have pointed out, plays, deliberately and tantalizingly, with the idea of a possible love affair between the ‘Noble Savage’, Uncas, and the plucky ‘white’ maiden, Cora, only to scotch, in the final chapter, the whole idea as being too much for the readership of the dominant white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant society to take. More to the point, as I suggested above, Cora can be imagined as Uncas’s possible mate only because she herself is not entirely ‘white’, her blood having been ‘tainted’ long before by a tryst between a white male ancestor and a black woman from the Caribbean. But, in the end, as the novel’s protagonist, the white frontier scout, Hawkeye, takes pains to point out for the reader, such an interracial union, between an Indian and even a partially ‘white’ woman, could not be countenanced anyway, so the question is, given the standards of the time, only hypothetical.

At the same time, however, there are differences between the Brazilian experience with miscegenation, where it seems to have been the norm from the very beginning, and that of Spanish America, where it runs the gamut from desirable to undesirable. And, as I have pointed out elsewhere (‘The Theme of Miscegenation’, 1991), there are a host of other New World texts that fall somewhere between these two poles and that, in so doing, reflect the various ways in which the theme of racial mixing permeates New World literature and culture. A course based on Native American texts and materials and focusing on the always explosive questions of race, racial mixing, gender, and identity might very well have a lot to tell us about whether, or to what degree, these same questions apply to the experiences of other ethnic groups in the Americas. In terms of its Native American dimension, such a course might also be enriched by a showing and discussion of the great John Ford film, *The Searchers* (1956), which, based as it is on a true story involving the Comanche and some white female captives they had taken (Gwynne, 2010: 120), offers a riveting insight into how destabilizing was this question of miscegenation, bound up in tensions about race, gender, sexuality, and identity, for American settlers on the western frontier of the early nineteenth century. Read, perhaps, in the context of the African American experience, for example, Native American literature’s contribution to the growing critical dialogue concerning our larger inter-American experience adds an invaluable perspective to our efforts to understand better who we are in the Americas and how our stories interrelate.

But thematology is not the only mechanism that allows us to organize inter-American approaches to Native American literary study. The question of genre also looms large in terms of its importance to this endeavor. Often immersed in music, dance, and spectacle, much Native American literature is what we think of today as being hybrid in nature, a mixture of different forms and modes of expression. For example, in exploring the application of the very misleading labels of ‘poetry’ and ‘prose’ to Native American texts (misleading because many Native American authors tend not to make this distinction at all), the scholar and translator, Karl Kroeber, has suggested that much, if not most, ‘Indian poetry appears to be built more on a form of metonymy, synecdoche, than upon metaphor’ (1983: 104), long regarded as the basic building block of non-Indian Western poetry. In this view, synecdoche underscores the performative nature of Native American songs and poems and affirms the active and needed participation of the audience. ‘Because an Indian poem exists as a socio-cultural synecdoche,’ Kroeber argues, ‘performance is essential to its form’,
which ‘never exists as text, only as act’ (106). From this cohesive, bonding, and collective nature of Native American literature, it is easy to understand how and why, for many Native American people, the ‘Word . . . is a sacrament, a vital force’, a ‘holy’ and ‘numinous’ thing (Swann, 1983: xi), one whose ‘only aim and intent is truth, not manipulation’ (xii). Standing in direct opposition, seemingly, to the revolutionary linguistics of Saussure, wherein the word is a communicative sign (composed of two distinct parts, the signifier and the signified) that is completely separated from its referent (that is, from all reality external to it and its system), language use, for Native Americans, ‘means that object and word are so fused that their creation, their “event”, is itself creative, bringing into this time and place the enduring powers which truly effect that which the event claims, and such action cannot be undone’ (ibid). If, for Saussure’s progeny of literary theoreticians, meaning necessarily becomes an arbitrary matter based on difference, for Native American writers and scholars language use, literature, and meaning possess a knowable, unifying, and unalterably social dimension, a sense of shared connection to the natural world and to each other that all human beings would do well to recognize and respect.

Because Native Americans do not ‘define poetry against prose’ (Kroeber, 1983: 103), as has long been the norm in Western literature, literary scholars today need to learn to think differently about the nature of Native American literary expression. There would seem to be a real danger that our very terminology, to say nothing of our aesthetic criteria, could lead us astray in trying to understand Native American letters. Indeed, Kroeber’s commentary (cited earlier) is invaluable to us even as it inescapably undercuts itself by imposing such Western terms as ‘metonymy’, ‘metaphor’, and even ‘poetry’ to measure an artistic and intellectual expression that may not recognize such distinctions. At the same time, we want to understand Native American literature, or cultural production, and to do this we must use language. If, as Kroeber contends, what we think of as the Native American ‘poem’ is a unique ‘integration of personal psychology and cultural ordering’ (102), one in which the word is held to be a sacred entity, then we can better understand why, against Jakobson’s understanding of poétique (as he uses this term to characterize Western poetry; see Jakobson, 1971: 307), the Native American poem emphasizes so much repetition (disdained in Western verse), rhythm (the importance of chants and dance), and musicality, but eschews ‘the kind of ambiguity and irony’ that readers nurtured on the Western tradition regard as ‘indispensable in poetry’ (Kroeber, 1983: 103). This Western distinction between poetry and prose — the literary analog of Jakobson’s famous distinction between metaphor and metonymy — thus becomes suspect when dealing with Native American texts (104).

Although Kroeber also contends that there seems to be a ‘paucity of vivid, original metaphors in American Indian poetry’, and that such a lack ‘may indicate that such metaphors, so characteristic of Western poetic art, substitute for efficacies of another kind in other cultures’ (104), it is not clear whether he is speaking only of North American Indian poetry or whether he also includes that of Central (that of the Maya, for example) or South America (that of the Inca, among others) as a basis for his conclusions. This would be an interesting and eminently useful project for a budding inter-Americanist interested in Native American literary study to undertake. As a number of scholars have shown, for example (see Brinton, 1887; Nicholson, 1959;
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Garibay, 1961), the Aztec poetic tradition, standing, seemingly, in such contrast to its more violent aspects, seems (via translations, sometimes from Náhuatl to Spanish and then from Spanish to English) grandly metaphysical and lushly appealing in its images, metaphors, and tropes. The conclusion Kroeber reaches, that ‘[a]ll Native American poetry is radically different from Western poetry’ (1983: 98), is fascinating, but one wonders, as we seek to examine Native American literature in a larger, more hemispheric context, if what this fine and astute critic says also holds for the other Native American cultures and literatures of ‘our America’ (to rewrite Martí, whose famous essay, ‘Nuestra América’, speaks only of Spanish America and its fraught relationship to the United States; problematically, it does not mention Brazil, which was developing its own, more comprehensive vision of ‘our America’). Or, as the scope of our study expands, will we encounter different poetic systems, along with different systems of ontology and epistemology, and find ourselves forced to draw new conclusions? This will be work for the next generation of inter-American scholars.

The inter-American project

Beyond the important question of genre, the inter-Americanist will hasten to point out, there are also the very great cultural differences that exist between our many Native American peoples and the vastly different civilizations they have created throughout the Americas. The powerful and sophisticated Aztec empire, for example, with its rich traditions in what we describe as philosophy and lyric poetry, must be considered in ways that do not obscure its social, historical, and political particularities and yet in ways that allow for its comparative study with the literature and political structures of the powerful and sophisticated Iroquois Confederation, for example. We can easily be trapped by relative terms like ‘powerful’ and ‘sophisticated’, and the particular images and examples these conjure up in our minds, and yet we must also be prepared to account for the all-important differences that do exist and to avoid the danger of homogenizing everything, of making different things seem to be the same, even when we know they are not. And something similar can be said for studies that would examine the literature and culture of, say, the Incan empire and those of the people of the Great Plains or those of the Northwest. In undertaking any type of comparative study, one must always be on guard against making unjustified assumptions about different cultures that enjoy fundamentally different systems of thought, assumptions that can lead us to make superficial and often erroneous conclusions. The world of the Pawnee, for example, or that of the Cherokee nation, is vastly different from that of the Brazilian Tupi-Guarani, and the would-be scholar of their literatures and cultures must be prepared to do the requisite amount of research and reading. This very problem, in fact, is inherent in the inter-American project (which is inherently comparative in nature), though its applicability to Native American literature must certainly reflect one of its most acute manifestations.

Yet for the very real strengths and opportunities that Native American literature and culture offer the inter-Americanist, we would be remiss if we did not remind ourselves of the complications and difficult questions they also pose for the inter-American project.
To begin with, many Native American peoples, having suffered so much and for so long at the hands of their European conquerors, are not enthusiastic about being labeled ‘American’ at all. Indeed, as Canadians know well, the very issue of nomenclature, of self-identification, becomes a sometimes explosive problem. And, of course, the way we choose to refer to ourselves and our people speaks directly to the larger question of identity, both personal and cultural. In Canada, where concerns over the importance and identities of the ‘First Peoples’ have long been a part of that nation’s on-going discourse regarding the question of identity, a national literature has emerged that counts Native American artists and intellectuals as key parts of its composition. Something similar can be said for Mexican literature and for the literatures of such nations as Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia (where Quechua, a still widely used indigenous language, is recognized by the government as an official state language).

In attempting to respond to this very real, and historically based, concern, I think it is important to remember that to participate in the inter-American project, a person and a culture do not have to renounce their primary identity. Indeed, they should not, and they are not expected to do so. French literature is no less French, for example, for also being European. At the same time, it is worth noting that, as anthropologists tell us, indigenous languages in the Americas are disappearing at an alarming rate, and with them, of course, their histories, their literatures, and their cultures. But if they can be recognized and integrated, with their language and culture intact, into the inter-American vision, their existence will not die out; indeed, they will live on, as a particular, unique people and as participants in the larger New World experience. This is, indeed, the very problem taken up by the Brazilian writer, activist, and anthropologist, Darcy Ribeiro, in his celebrated novel, *Maíra* (1978).

It is important to bear in mind that the recognition and embracing of difference, in language, in literary texts, and in cultures, lies at the heart of the comparative method, and we would do well to bear that methodological axiom in mind as we consider the case of Native American literature and its relationship to the future of inter-American literary study, which, as Antonio Barrenechea notes, can be said to be entering a ‘second wave’ of development (see Barrenechea, 2009; Bauer, 2009). For historical reasons, the question of Native American literature’s relationship to the inter-American project is more complicated and, for some, painful, than is comparative literature’s traditional reliance on extensive foreign language study and on the relationship between a particular language system and the concept of a ‘national literature’. And while, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the very idea of a national literature is being questioned (see Porter, 2011: 245), the crucial importance of foreign language study to the discipline of comparative literature stands unassailable. For me, it is, first and foremost, the systematic study of a language, the raw material of all literature (oral or written), that constitutes the heart of comparative literary study. The systematic and extended study of at least three different languages, indeed, is the *sine qua non* of comparative literature as a discipline, and the more comparative literature gives ground on this issue as a requirement, the more untenable its position as a unique field of study becomes. And when we consider the importance of language study to the inter-American project, we must remember that such Native American tongues as Nàhuatl, Quechua, Algonquin, or Cherokee are just as valid and important as English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. Indeed, we could
easily consider our Native American languages as foundational to all our Americas, much as Latin is basic to much of European language and culture. As the Native American literature question shows quite dramatically, in fact, the visceral connection between the language a culture speaks and writes and its sense of collective identity, of being a ‘nation’, and thereby possessing a ‘national literature’, makes the question of language (and language study) more primary, more fundamental to comparative literature, than the more political question of ‘national literature’. If, for Native Americans, the ‘word’ is sacred (Swann, 1983: xi–xii), then so, too, is the national literature that stems from it.

In the course of their insistence that the student undergo intense linguistic training, however, the best comparative literature programs will also recommend that, in order to become properly versed in the different histories, political and economic systems, religions, and sociologies of the national literatures being presented as areas of expertise, the student also take courses and do readings in these related fields. It is, therefore, particularly incumbent on the inter-American comparatist to maintain and honor these critical differences (of language, history, and culture) as the comparison is carried forward and developed, commenting on the special characteristics of each Native American text and culture under consideration and contrasting them with each other. This method thus allows the comparatist a way of bringing together, for comparative study, the texts, songs, and other cultural artifacts of such diverse Native American peoples as the Iroquois, the Sioux, the Aztec, the Maya, the Inca, and the Tupi-Guarani, and to do so without homogenizing them, without making them all seem the same, which we know they most certainly are not. The comparative approach, as Gordon Brotherston and Lúcia de Sá note, ‘is indispensable for any approach to Native American texts’ (2004: 25). This is so largely because only this method ensures that proper attention will be paid to the question of language and identity and because only the comparative approach, which focuses not only on the similarities that allow comparisons to take place but on the all-important differences that make each culture, and text, unique, allows us to begin to understand ‘the huge and ever-growing debt owed to the native literatures of the Americas by the widest variety of authors writing in the languages’, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English, ‘that Europe brought to America’ (25; see also 18).

Although the history of the clash between the Europeans and the Native Americans throughout the Americas is a tragic one, and an ongoing one, there can be no question about the profound influence that Native American culture has exerted, and that it continues to exert, on literary development in the New World. If we had nothing else to do so, this fact alone would justify the comparative study of Native American literature as a hemispheric phenomenon. So while we understand how and why the phrase, ‘inter-American literature’, can be offensive and objectionable to some, its practitioners mean it only as a useful methodological framework within which different cultures can be studied together and within which defining characteristics are to be recognized, valued, and maintained.

Second, because the great bulk of Native American culture is so ancient, so profoundly oral in nature, and so dependent on translation for its dissemination, what we think we know about it today is actually quite small, only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. As Ursula Le Guin observes, of this problem:
Reading an oral piece translated from its original language to English, and from voice to print, is like reading a musical score: you have to know a lot before you can hear what’s happening. On the page, oral literature seems stiff and ‘primitive’, because it’s less than half there; it’s only the notation of a performance. (1989: 15)

And, finally, Native American literary study has not yet achieved the respect it deserves, not in the Academy and not in our American cultures at large. Although it is true that certain American nations, Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, or the Andean nations of South America for example, have embraced their Pre-Columbian heritages, too many have not. This must be one of the goals for artists, students, and scholars of Native American literature and culture in the upcoming decades of the twenty-first century, and it should rank high on the agenda of inter-Americanists as well. All in all, it is not hard to see how a course using Native American materials and focusing on the relationship between human beings and their various cultures and value systems in the Americas could be both popular and valuable. And similarly valuable new courses could be developed around such issues as gender and gender relations, ‘race’ and racial conflict, cultural and individual identity, power structures and decision making, and the importance of the communal over the private. The time for the emergence of Native American studies seems propitious indeed.

Opportunities for both approaches abound, and I urge us to work together, whenever possible, to move the Native American agenda ahead on all fronts, that is, as separate and distinct expressions of a particular historical, linguistic, and cultural identity (the Cherokee Nation, for example, or the Iroquois Confederation, the Aztec Empire, and the Incan Empire) and as players in the larger inter-American discourse that is rapidly gaining ground throughout the New World. As the inter-American project continues to grow and develop, as it surely will, Native American literature and cultural production will most assuredly be a key part of it. Of this there can be no doubt. We are fortunate to live in a time when more and more scholarly attention is being paid to Native American literature and to our hemisphere’s many, and diverse, Native American heritages. This is an important undertaking, and, working together in the best spirit of Native American communality, we will all benefit from its serious study.

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Notes

1 The inter-American project, which I began to develop in the late 1960s and early 1970s, involves the comparative study of the literatures of English- and French-speaking Canada, the United States, the Caribbean, Spanish America, and Brazil, plus those of the many Native American cultures that populate the Americas. A few years later, in 1982, the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) would focus on inter-American literary study as an emergent discipline with tremendous potential for the discipline and for the literatures and cultures involved, including those representing Native America and the First Peoples.

2 Although Native American literature can be said to unite the Americas as a shared cultural heritage, the closely related question of identity (and whether it is an issue of blood or culture or something else) remains a complex and, at times, contentious issue
for Native American literature and for the discipline of Native American Studies. And, of course, it also speaks to the larger question of what we mean when we call ourselves ‘Americans’, or to what the term ‘American’ really means to those who would use it.

3 The first half of the nineteenth century (Brazilian Romanticism) and the first three decades of the twentieth century, roughly corresponding to Brazil’s Modernist period, were particularly fecund in terms of their cultivation of Native American themes, traditions, and motifs.

4 For Borges, working from the texts included in George Cronyn’s anthology, The Path of the Rainbow (1918), Native American literature ‘surprises by its contemplative perception of the visual world, its delicacy, its magic, and its terseness’ (1973: 277).

5 In its original form, of course, the Rabinal Achi was undoubtedly oral, and quite likely a mixture of both music and dance, and so to speak of it today, in 2013, as a ‘work’ of ‘literature’ is to enter into the myriad complexities that characterize the study of Native American culture.

6 Critics and literary historians in Spanish America have long regarded Aves sin nido (1889; Torn From the Nest, 1998), by Peruvian writer, Clorinda Matto de Turner, as the prototype of the Indigenista novel.

7 As René Prieto writes, apropos this connection, ‘the writers of the “Ciclo de Chiapas” suggest that the Indians who have come in contact with Western society either lose their identity and are alienated from both worlds, or settle into white towns to improve their own lives, thinking about their fellow Indians back in the village only when an opportunity arises to get something out of them’ (1996: 161). As in the case of contemporary Canada, the ‘Ciclo de Chiapas’ reflects a situation regarding Native Americans that is far from resolved.

8 With respect to his commitment to protecting the rights of the Native Americans in his zone of contact, Las Casas can, in the inter-American context, be profitably compared to Roger Williams, in the United States, and to Brazil’s Antônio Vieira.

9 Going beyond its cultural importance to Brazil specifically, the novel’s title, Iracema, is also an anagram for ‘America’.

10 The point I wish to make here is that, while this tendency had existed earlier (as in A Moreninha, typically considered Brazil’s first successful novel), from Iracema on, Brazilian literature shows a steady commitment to texts that, though often written by men (Aluizio Azevedo, Machado de Assis, and Oswald de Andrade are three good examples), promote the creation of female characters who are strong, independent, and engaged in different forms of self-determination. It is possible to argue, I believe, that the later Machado even viewed young women as a critical part of post-Republic Brazil’s future as a modern and progressive nation-state and that, in turn, this tradition made it possible for Brazil to produce as many important women writers as it has.

11 With respect to the literary history of the United States, one thinks immediately of the possibly apocryphal Pocahontas story, wherein the young Indian woman is said to have saved the life of Captain John Smith. It is worth noting that the later Pocahontas/John Rolfe story has a striking parallel in the structure of a key text from colonial Brazil, the epic poem, Caramuru (1781), by Frei José de Santa Rita Durão.

12 The sexuality, and especially female sexuality, of Agaguk is much more explicit than it is in Iracema, where it is more implied than expressed.

13 One of Paz’s most brilliant, and canonical, poems is Piedra de sol (1957; Sun Stone, 1963), which, circular in both structure and cosmology, is based on his study of the famous Aztec calendar stone.

14 In some ways reminiscent of Canadian writer, Brian Moore’s superb novel, Black Robe (1985), Maladrón, a personal favorite of Asturias, tells the story of a group of sixteenth-century Spanish soldiers lost, along with their Indian guides, in the American jungle and how, as they gradually seek to overcome their mutual mistrust, these two groups end up experiencing a positive interaction and transculturation.

15 Typically considered Asturias’ most abstruse text, Tres de cuatro soles deals with the sacred, creative force of language and its importance as the magical, life-affirming connector between human beings (specifically the Maya and the Aztec people) and their gods. Continuing in the tradition earlier established by Clarivigilia primaveral (1965), which focuses more specifically on the sacred importance of poetry to the Maya, Tres de cuatro soles would also be useful in a course or project dealing with the creation myth in American Indian literature.

16 As Swann notes: ‘In an Indian context . . . the concept of “control” does not really obtain. Reality is not “controlled”, no matter on how high a plane. We would do better to talk about reciprocity, balancing, right acting and right telling in the interests of equilibrium’ (1983: xi).

17 If one were looking for a single sociopolitical event that seemed to crystallize an earlier but more inchoate sense of indigenous literature and culture in Canada, it might well be the so-called Oka crisis of 1990, when ‘watershed events in Canadian politics and social life brought Native issues to the fore’ (Fagan & McKegney, 2008: 35). Three years earlier, in 1987, Cree Manitoba legislator, Elijah Harper, successfully blocked the implementation of the Meech Lake Accords, which, involving issues of commercial land development on ground judged to be sacred by Native Americans, had been reached without input from the First Peoples most directly affected. By 1990, Harper’s resistance to the terms of the agreement led to a sometimes violent
confrontation between ‘Mohawk warriors and Quebec provincial police, and subsequently the Canadian military, at Kanehsatake’ that ‘made mainstream Canadians take notice as Native people in Canada became increasingly politicized and outspoken. A byproduct of this cultural shift was the recognition among Canadian publishers of a growing market for Native works’ (ibid).

16 Maira is the name of the Tupi diety who is the creator of all life.

19 Thanks to recent work done by biologists and geneticists (see Tilghman, 2011), we now know that our old notions about race, and about supposed racial ‘superiority’ and ‘inferiority’, are all wrong; that, genetically speaking, there are as many differences within what we used to think were specific ‘races’ as there are between them. This new, scientifically-based knowledge allows us, or forces us, to realize that our old ideas about ‘race’ were, and are, entirely spurious, simple but deeply damaging social, political, and economic constructs, forms of self-delusion and prejudice that have inflicted terrible pain and misery on millions of innocent people.

References


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