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## Reviews

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**From Sand Creek.** By Simon J. Ortiz. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1981. 96pp. \$10.95 Cloth. \$4.95 Paper.

The field of contemporary Native American poetry is studded with a number of luminous writers, among them Maurice Kenny, Wendy Rose, Joy Harjo, James Welch, Paula Gunn Allen, Peter Blue Cloud, Adrian Louis, Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, Linda Hogan, Mary Tall Mountain, William Oandasan, Roberta Hill Whiteman, Geary Hobson, Duane Niatum and Barney Bush.

One of the strongest voices to have emerged from this exceptionally strong genre during the past decade has been that of Simon J. Ortiz, a member of the Acoma nation. Prior to his most recent effort, Ortiz authored four books of verse: *Going for the Rain* (Harper and Row, 1976), *A Good Journey* (Turtle Island Press, 1977), *The People Shall Continue* (Children's Book Press/Imprenta de Libros Infantiles, 1977) and *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, For the Sake of the Land* (Institute for Native American Development, University of New Mexico, 1980). Aside from his book-length collections, Ortiz's work has appeared over the years in various poetic and non-poetic periodicals, as accompaniment to several non-poetry books and in both Indian and non-Indian books of collected poems.

Known primarily for his longer epic narratives, Ortiz has also consistently excelled at short impactful statements. In either format he has always opted to serve in the time-honored tribal capacity of storyteller/historian (a common motivating aspect of much modern Indian poetic endeavor) and to incorporate overt political analysis into his work. Ortiz draws direct connections between the historical experiences of his and other Native American nations and the current quandary in which most American Indians find themselves. He has also long been wont to draw clear parallels between the situation in which Native America now finds itself and the plight of other disenfranchised groups within North America.

Ortiz's political message is straightforward enough: colonialism, the predicate to the emergence of European-style nation-states in this hemisphere, is not only alive and well today, it has spread on a society-wide basis and become sublimated and entrenched. In its most institutionalized form colonialism has become a constant—if often unconscious—factor determining the nature of modern American existence. And, contends Ortiz, the critical ingredient to conscious understanding of this reality is apprehension of the contemporary reality of the most colonized and ignored social element: Native America. Such apprehension is the veritable key to unleashing the dual processes of de-sublimation and de-colonization.

With the publication of *From Sand Creek*, Ortiz's most recent book and his first fully book-length poem, the author has accomplished two things. First, he has transcended his earlier tension between long and short narrative forms, revealing himself to be an innovative and accomplished master of the epic. Second, in achieving this maturity, he has moved from being a major voice among a field of very strong poets to becoming the *poet laureate* of Native America—a description which is not used casually.

*From Sand Creek* combines the various elements of the Ortiz approach to meaningful poetic communication in a single continuous *tour de force*, featuring the juxtaposition and balancing of prosaic descriptive passages on left hand pages with bitterly brilliant verse on the right. The emotive quality of the latter contrasts in an eerily effective harmony with the former. The effect is devastating. For example, at the onset, Ortiz observes,

November 29, 1864: On that cold dawn, about 600 Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho people, two thirds of them women and children, were camped on a bend of Sand Creek in southeastern Colorado. The people were at peace. . . . The Reverend John Chivington and his Volunteers and Fort Lyons troops, numbering more than 700 heavily armed men, slaughtered 105 women and children and 28 men. . . . By mid-1865, the Cheyenne and Arapaho had been driven out of Colorado Territory.

Such facts have been recited often enough and come as no particular surprise to anyone reasonably acquainted with American history. To the contrary, their very repetition has deadened the

reader's intrinsic horror of their meaning. The information has lost whatever validity of generalized impact it might once have possessed. Hence, on the facing page Ortiz graphically depicts not what has just been said but its inference, the very *meaning* of it:

This America  
has been a burden  
of steel and mad  
death

The lines, at first glance, might well have been penned by, say, Allen Ginsberg, as a passage to "Howl." But here, through an intentional shifting of context away from symptoms (such as the urban *zeitgeist* Ginsberg assailed in the 1950s) to the causes of the symptoms, Ortiz acquires a power and a vision unattainable for even the most accomplished of topical poets; in a word, his analysis is fundamentally more radical.\*

With this position established, Ortiz proceeds to expose the overarching theme of this book, the understanding of the carnage to achieve a different future:

but, look now,  
there are flowers  
and new grass  
and a spring wind  
rising  
from Sand Creek.

Elsewhere, Ortiz posits what he believes to be the result of the failure to grip the meaning of Euro/Indian relations. On the left-hand page he notes, "Repression works like a shadow, clouding memory and sometimes even to blind, and when it is on a national scale, it is just not good." Again the reader might pass by the enormity of meaning contained in this simple statement, were it not for the stunning implications Ortiz brings in the accompanying verse:

In 1969  
XXXX Coloradoans  
were killed in Vietnam.

\*"Radical" is used here in accordance with its precise meaning, from the Greek *radic*, to look to the root or source of things for answers and guidance.

In 1978  
XXXX Coloradoans  
were killed on the highways.

In 1864  
there were no Indians killed.

Remember My Lai.

In fifty years,  
nobody knew  
what happened.

It wasn't only the Senators.

Remember Sand Creek.

The events depicted are interconnected. Failure to deal with the massacre at Sand Creek and to deal with the outlooks and attitudes which allowed it to happen and which made it emblematic of "the winning of the West" have led to endless repetition. My Lai, that hideous emblem of the American "effort" in Vietnam, can *only* be understood through the comprehension that it had happened before at Sand Creek. The reason for My Lai is to be found in the forgetting of Sand Creek; the forgetting of My Lai leads inevitably to the "tragic" bombing of a mental hospital in Grenada and the prospect of further atrocities during an incipient U.S. invasion of Nicaragua. Sand Creek, in the sense that Ortiz utilizes the massacre, signifies the whole of an ongoing and very American process.

Had he ended his analysis at this point, Ortiz's argument would be primarily moral. However, he is more far reaching. As with any longstanding colonial process, the U.S. model rapidly arrived at a situation where the colonial victimizer became the victimized. The colonial process requires a constant supply of victims; it ultimately cares not whether these be members of colonized nations (such as the Cheyenne or Vietnamese) or members of the colonizing nation itself. Hence, Ortiz's reference to the number of citizens of Colorado—the state literally built upon the blood bones of Sand Creek—who died in Vietnam and on the state's highways a century later, victims of the same consumptive process which had claimed the Cheyenne non-combatants that morning in 1864.

Thus Ortiz calls upon the general reader to engage not in an altruistic crusade to render abstract justice to the long dead or to

imperialism's victims across the face of the Third and Fourth Worlds but to recognize a very personal jeopardy as well: the mutilated forms shipped home in body bags or to Veterans Administration hospitals were not Vietnamese but "the boy next door." The bodies will continue to come home, and increasingly so, until the attitudes and perspectives which now sanction America's right to imperial pretention change. The price of arrogance is costly, prohibitively so in the long run, despite stopgaps and rhetoric to the contrary. The chickens of which Malcolm X once spoke have inevitably come home to roost, and they continue their coming.

This is a harsh lesson. It is difficult to understand the attitude of repression at play upon the public consciousness and the phenomenon of national chauvinism it engenders:

no wonder  
 they deny regret  
 for the slaughter  
 of their future.  
 Denying eternity, it is no wonder  
 they become so selflessly  
 righteous.

While understandable, the repression is nonetheless untenable. Although the facts, both historical and topical, can be intellectually equivocated and denied, the costs concomitant to the facts continue to accrue unabated. Here Ortiz offers a timeless observation on the warfare which is the reality of colonization, once the glossy veneer of manifest destiny is left behind:

They were amazed  
 at so much blood.  
                                 Spurting,  
                                 Sparkling,  
 splashing, bubbling, steady  
 hot arcing streams.  
                                 Red  
 and bright and vivid  
 unto the grassed plains  
                                 Steaming.

In this passage he could be referring to the physicality of combat between Dog Soldiers and the 3rd Colorado Volunteers in

1864 or between the 1st Air Cavalry and the North Vietnamese Army in Vietnam's Ia Drang Valley in 1965. The interchangeability of reality is exactly what Ortiz intended and he accomplishes his objective strikingly.

The same sort of synonymy is extended, equally convincingly, from the American Indian victims of White "progress" to the White victims of the same process:

Cold,  
the wind lurches  
blunt and sad.  
Below freezing in Colorado.  
Ghosts Indian-like  
still driven  
towards Oklahoma.

And, from the White settlers, displaced and forcibly relocated ("Indian-like") by the imperatives and pressures surrounding the internal consolidation of American capital, Ortiz turns to his symbol of the synonymy of contemporary results, the maimed veterans—crippled residue of an empire's cutting edge—consigned to the limbo-land reservations ("Indian-like," once again) of the nation's Veterans Administration hospitals:

O  
train and people and plains,  
look at me and the hospital  
where stricken men and broken boys  
are mortared and sealed  
into its defensive walls. O look,  
now.

At this juncture Ortiz stands fully revealed in his vision. It is an insight into the dualism which is the final ethos of the reality of that which has come to be called "America." On the one hand an outlook underpinning a process which, as with any cancer, destroys all that it touches (including its host) and—ultimately—itself. On the other hand stands a physicality of earth, air and water that gives, always, the promise of an infinite, wondrous existence. These are the negative and positive poles, respectively, of Ortiz's thesis.

In demonstrating the victimization shared by all people subjected to the negative, Ortiz articulates the nature of the transfor-

mative consciousness required to move into the realm of the positive. Ortiz's preoccupation with both American Indians and disabled veterans are, in this sense, merely the lensmatic tools of comparison and explanation deployed to this end.

Insofar as the unstated objective of *From Sand Creek* is to provide an expressive vehicle through which the need for universal liberation may be posited and understood, Ortiz's project has been exceedingly ambitious. To the extent that it attains its goal it transcends its poetic medium. Such transcendence is, of course, the acid test of whether any given body of verse is only very good, or whether it has made the leap into the rarified ranks of that poetry which is "great." This effort by Simon Ortiz must be accorded the latter distinction.

Such is the compelling quality of the work that we are inevitably drawn to share wholeheartedly in the essence of the author's vision, his dream:

That dream  
shall have a name  
after all,  
and it will not be vengeful  
but wealthy with love  
and compassion  
and knowledge.  
And it will rise  
in this heart  
which is our America.

Ward Churchill  
University of Colorado, Boulder

**Seasonal Woman.** By Luci Tapahonso. Santa Fe, NM: Tooth of Time Books, 1982. 72 pp. \$5.00 Paper.

Luci Tapahonso is a Navajo woman from Shiprock, Navajo Nation and has two daughters whose father is Earl Ortiz, an artist and the brother of Simon J. Ortiz, the Acoma Pueblo writer. *Seasonal Woman* is Tapahonso's second book of poems, *One More Shiprock Night* being the other which is now out of print. *Seasonal Woman* is illustrated with drawings by R. C. Gorman, Jr., the acclaimed Navajo artist living in Taos, New Mexico. Gorman's