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Muting White Noise: Native American and European American Novel Traditions. By James H. Cox. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006. 352 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

A long tradition exists in Native American writing that challenges Indian stereotypes recurrent in American literature and popular culture. Taking his title from Sherman Alexie, a writer long concerned with the roles that popular culture and modern technology play in spreading stereotypes and shaping public opinion, Cox examines the construction of narratives about Indians in American and Native American literature. His argument is that the "white noise" drowns out Native voices just as non-Native authors and academics displace the Native American perspective by physically occupying Native American's spaces in universities, on library shelves, and in the media.

Cox's choice of the words *Native* and *non-Native authors* fundamentally changes the paradigm from the very beginning, privileging the Native perspective. His investigation begins with questioning the Eurocentric perspective that shapes the ways in which Indians are imagined not only in obscure frontier and dime novels but also in classics of American literature. He looks at how popular culture disseminates the harmful stereotypes and thus reinforces the domination and marginalization of Native American people. Then he gets to the point of his book: the exploration of the ways in which Native American authors successfully dismantle the stereotypes, collapse the Eurocentric worldview, and rewrite the narratives of conquest that necessarily resulted in the Native American population's annihilation by assimilation or extermination. To this effect, after surveying the constant critique and revision from early Native American texts to the present, his analysis focuses in particular on the works of Thomas King, Gerald Vizenor, and Sherman Alexie.

Cox closely examines King's argument in *Green Grass, Running Water* (1994) that directly connects the Bible to acts of conquest and oppression. By employing a Native understanding of the world, King's subversive rewriting of Genesis liberates creation from its divine ruler and substitutes individual agency with cooperation. First Woman leaves the garden as an act of feminist defiance not punishment. Noah's attempt to rescue the world is linked to the missionaries. The discrepancies between the two versions are the result of the tricks played by Coyote (as is the virgin birth). A cyclical movement replaces the Western linear progression. Instead of having Natives written into the Western traditions, King has Western foundational texts rewritten from a Native perspective, a narrative strategy meant to shift the balance of power. The challenge is not to let one text alone shape our understanding of the world.

King will apply the same narrative strategy to revise *Moby-Dick*, a novel whose plot has elicited responses from several Native writers such as Louise Erdrich, Scott N. Momaday, and Louis Owens. These alternative narratives privileging the Native perspective challenge the stereotypes perpetuated by American literature and popular culture and imagine an alternate reality. In *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* (2003) King contrasts the Western worldview built on hierarchies and domination with Native tradi-

tions constructed on equality, harmony, and balance among mythic figures, humans, and animals.

Highlighting the politics inherent in stories, Cox's analysis of King's argument underscores the power of stories to shape reality and perpetuate a reality of injustice, with Native Americans forever occupying the subordinate position in the binary Americans—Native Americans. Authorial power makes all the difference, and Native Americans are at a disadvantage in disseminating their stories. This disadvantage materializes in lost land and power.

Not surprisingly, Vizenor's approach adds a new level of sophistication to this tradition of contestation. Although his critique of the damage done to Indians by discovery and frontier narratives is pervasive throughout his vast body of work, and although he provided major revisions from the Anishinaabe perspective to the fundamental narratives that shape American history, his aim is not to replace one story with another but instead to unveil the processes involved in the making of stories and show how they manipulate realities. Suspicious of final authorities and definitive texts, he condemns anyone who claims ultimate power to inscribe destinies into narratives that leave no place for alternative plots. Vizenor coined the term *terminal creeds* for the rigid beliefs that undermine all other possibilities and dominate by denying the validity of any other perspective, thus silencing them. According to him, even acts of liberation can turn into acts of domination. Cox notes that for Vizenor "imagination is a sovereign space" and a subversive space as such, a space that can be used to shape an alternative reality beyond domination (103).

Alan Velie analyzes Vizenor's use of parody and allegory in *Braveheart* (1978), discusses his reversal of the "gothic dialectic," and demonstrates how in Vizenor's view storytelling imposes values that in turn will inform the construction of reality (106). For Vizenor good and evil are no longer binaries but instead are contextual constructs. As Kimberly Blaeser notes, his frontier is a "place where the diverse accounts of history come into contact with one another," where he unmask stereotypes, and where history "emerges somewhere between fact and fiction, somewhere between the probable and the possible," thus underscoring the complexity of narratives (124). In *Heirs of Columbus* (1991) Vizenor appropriates the making of America from a Native perspective. Just like the Anishinaabe trickster, his imagination and humor cannot be contained by the rigid structure of a metanarrative; they defy authority. One story is forever incomplete; truth is context generated and context bound. Conflicting versions can all be true. His novel imagines infinite possibilities because imagination is the place of liberation and resistance.

Sherman Alexie brings into sharp focus concrete examples of popular culture productions that perpetuate Indian stereotypes and expose their absurdity. And what more effective way of undermining them is there than to scrutinize and make fun of them? His combination of pain and humor enables him not to evade everyday tragic consequences triggered by the stereotypes while laughing at the ridiculous assumptions passed for legitimate knowledge. Cox follows the intricacies of Alexie's multiple revisions in "Rediscovering

America” and states that he “ends his poem at the point that a non-Native audience might lose interest: when a Native person opens his mouth to tell jokes rather than announce the imminent disappearance of his tribe” (150). Alexie’s successful stand-up comedian routines paint a different reality.

Hollywood movies about Indians, just like radio and television programs such as *The Lone Ranger*, have a brainwashing effect on audiences. Mass-produced culture—a combination in which “culture” looks rather out of place—is an indiscriminate oppressive mechanism of perpetuating violence. Alexie weaves his narratives of survival and resistance that incorporate stereotypical images only to laugh at them. In *Smoke Signals* (1999), Victor and Thomas, two real Indians, debate how to be a real Indian “to look like you just got back from killing buffalo.” And although they know that the members of their tribe were fishermen, the stereotype is what matters: “You want to look like you just got back from catching a fish? It ain’t Dances with Salmon, you know?” (282). Invented misrepresentations of Indian warriors aided by visions are alienating for Alexie’s characters who feel displaced and inauthentic, unable to fit into their great traditions.

Cox agrees with the objections some critics such as Gloria Bird raised about Alexie’s depictions of Indians; namely that they can be misleading for non-Indian readers with limited knowledge of Indians who may take them for “‘real,’ rather than serious challenges to stereotypes and caricatures” (172). One really needs to find a reader with no sense of humor—or much common sense either—for that apprehension to materialize, a reader on which the previous scene’s hilarity about real Indians is wasted. This reader would take the first of the “Reservation’s Ten Commandments as Given by the United States Government to the Spokane Indians” in *Reservation Blues* (1995)—“You shall have no other forms of government before me”—literally and not detect its absurdity (154).

There is no better antidote to the stereotypes in the media than reading Native American writers, great writers like the ones discussed by Cox in his book. The perception of Indians by American readers has changed with the dissemination of Native American works. The more successful they are the more their stories will find an audience. Literature with a “message” or social agenda didn’t work very well for the experiments in “socialist realism,” and it’s unlikely that they would work any better now. The one huge challenge that remains regards how many people get their information from written sources and how many do so from already digested popular culture. If, as it seems, more people get their information from popular culture rather than written sources, the antidote is not going to work that well. This is one of the larger challenges facing Americans and Native Americans alike.

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