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Admittedly, it is difficult to address complex topics in a short narrative. Although the author candidly states that when Mexico won its War of Independence in 1821, “many mission Indian neophytes rejoiced in the mistaken belief that a country that fought for freedom would in turn grant them liberty,” he did not describe just how the Indians came to lose their liberty to begin with or what this life-without-liberty looked like (20). For all the fine attributes of this book, I wish the author had trusted his readers to appreciate not only the political, economic, and logistical aspects of the Spanish colonization of California but also the sweeping devastation of Native cultures that accompanied this endeavor.

*Julia G. Costello*

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**Explorations in Navajo Poetry and Poetics.** By Anthony K. Webster. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009. 288 pages. \$34.95 paper.

*Explorations in Navajo Poetry and Poetics* has much to offer the general reader, along with those more focused on the Navajo community, with its potential for influence in the wider literary sphere. Readers generally interested in Native American studies will find this volume interesting in its own right, especially specialists in ethnopoetics concerned with the relationship between written, or what I call alphabetical poetry, and public performance. All told, this volume helps to demonstrate that poetry remains a vibrant force for asserting identity on and off the reservation.

It should also be useful in any classroom dealing with oral traditions ranging from classical and medieval studies to courses more focused on the contemporary literary scene in which the language of poetry has undergone a shift from the formal to the colloquial as the awareness of ethnic diversity expands. It should be especially useful in a tribal college setting in which aspiring students are encouraged to apply their own tribal heritage to poetry. Thus I would encourage anyone interested in poetry for its own sake to explore this volume in order to recognize how art can function in a Native American community in order to help resist eclipse from the dominant culture.

The author's goals are clearly stated and generally well met. He sets out to argue on behalf of “the need to understand literature from its ethnographic and linguistic perspectives,” “show the value in applying ethnopoetic, discourse-centered approaches to contemporary poetry,” and make a special claim for the importance of poetry as a way of exploring and applying those issues in today's Navajo world (vii–viii).

The author's knowledge of the current poetic scene in the Navajo community is thorough. He has communicated widely with those producing poetry in the community who recite it publicly, draw knowingly from Native sources, have published poetry, and use their authorial identity in order to promote tribal cohesiveness. His keen interpretive skills demonstrate a thorough appreciation for the work he examines, as it applies to Navajo life today and in its broader, worldlier aesthetic reach. As a result, readers are made aware that Navajos are purveyors of a rich poetic tradition that the mainstream literary world would do well to recognize and that American literature has deeper roots than literary history conventionally allows.

Webster's organization serves his purpose well. Grounded in a close familiarity of how the language coexists with today's English, his introduction offers a general survey of Navajo poetry and poetics. Thereafter he identifies largely indigenous "poetic devices" present alike in written and orally performed poetry, explores the relationship between meaning and sound in reservation poetry, shows how it resonates politically as well as aesthetically, examines how language and ideology interface in what Navajo poets are writing and reciting, identifies the broad emotional scale they register in producing work pertinent to their identities, and shows how it serves to articulate "Navajo-ness," not only on the reservation but elsewhere.

To his credit, he fortifies his individual explorations with wide ethnographic awareness culled from scholars who have explored language use in poetic production elsewhere among Native American tribes. A partial list includes Keith Basso, Franz Boas, Julie Cruikshank, Paul Friedrich, Harry Hoijer, Dell Hymes, David McAllester, and Dennis Tedlock although it seems that he has yet to become more familiar with Brian Swann's fine anthologies (for example, *Coming to Light* [1994] and *Voices from Four Directions* [2004]). When it serves his purpose to place the material he examines in a deeper ethnographic context in order, he counts on such luminaries in earlier Navajo studies as Clyde Kluckhohn, Gladys Reichard, and Gary Witherspoon and brings an even broader perspective to that material when he consults world-class poets and theorists like W. H. Auden, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roman Jakobson, and Edward Sapir. This work thus serves as a detailed introductory application of contemporary ethnopoetics within a specific Native American tribe.

In spite of my enthusiasm for this fine work, however, I read it with an overlay of concern: reluctantly to be sure, given what Webster has accomplished during a relatively short period—he spent fifteen months in the field beginning in the spring of 2000, returned to the reservation for the summers of 2007 and 2008, and corresponded frequently with Navajo poets in between. But as I review his detailed chapters, I find that much remains to be said in order to tell a fuller story. In describing how the poets he covers invoke

their past, Webster neglects to show amply that they reflect the rich legacy of creation mythology, the underlying ceremonial activity of this mythology, the poetic idiom maintained by the singers who conduct the ceremonies in vibrant gatherings, and the intricate worldview these singers maintain.

That lapse recurs in his discussions of the poets and their poems. To cite one by Luci Tapahonso featuring the four sacred mountains, for example, he sidesteps her knowledge of their creation, which is fundamental to what they represent (38). Another occurs when he repeats the sound of an approaching deity in a poem by Gloria Emerson to illustrate how Navajo poets use ideophony but says all too little about the “Holy People,” whose utterances figure not only in the stories but also at the ceremonies, which continue to enhance well-being for many today and which display a traditional poetic idiom deeply embedded in much of what is now being written and recited (71).

Many other examples straddle this work. To name two more, the author mentions a dialogue between Coyote and First Woman in a poem by Esther Belin without expanding on the importance of that female deity’s role in the earliest phase of the creation cycle or the trickster’s ongoing presence as a threat to *hozhoon*—the mixture of balance, beauty, and harmony that remains a living value in the Navajo community (115). He refers to White Shell Woman in passing when discussing a work of Laura Tohe without introducing her putative sister, Changing Woman—among the most important of all Navajo deities and certainly the most favored, as so many of the poems show, directly or by implication (173).

Taken individually, these lapses may not seem crucial, especially given the focus on contemporary Navajo poets who identify themselves as such, as opposed to the more anonymous traditional singers, storytellers, and exponents of the myths still invoked by a rich oral tradition. That legacy makes its way into the consciousness even of young Navajos who claim no outward allegiance to their tradition. Furthermore, he virtually overlooks how the work of the pioneer ethnologists Washington Matthews and Father Berard Haile demonstrates the pervasiveness of that legacy in lines by poets like Martha Austin-Garrison, Shonto Begay, Rex Lee Jim, Blackhorse Mitchell, and so many others influenced by their Navajo heritage, whether knowingly or less outwardly, and whether they write and perform in English, Navajo, or the composite vernacular Webster identifies as “Navlish.”

Granted, it can be unfair to criticize a work for its omissions, especially in this case in which so much has been accomplished. But greater awareness of traditional Navajos’ deep resonance in tribal life is needed to appreciate how amply Navajo poetry reflects an amazingly rich and poetically charged tradition. Its roots tap into the regional loam of Pueblo heritage and draw from an ancient Native past stretching from the far Athabascan north to the distant

Mesoamerican south, revealing what dynamic purveyors of poetic practice Native American peoples have been, far back into pre-Columbian times. In that regard, this work still represents a milestone of sorts because it points to how much there is to learn.

In the author's defense, I recall a question demanded of me by the late Martin Vigil, then governor of Tesuque Pueblo, when I asked him to share his knowledge about Pueblo poetry many years ago. At the time, I had come armed with little more than a hunch that there was such a thing as Native American poetry—which was virtually unheard of then. "Do you have fifty years?" he asked, "because that's how much time you will need just to get started." He then went on to explain why Pueblos do not share their elaborate oral traditions with outsiders but suggested that I might find Navajos willing to do so.

I followed his advice, and since then have continued to learn from the many Navajos with whom I remain affiliated. That was more than forty years ago, closing in on the half-century Governor Vigil spoke of, and now I understand what he meant. When taken to include oral tradition and its allied activities of storytelling, ritual, and ceremony in its close alliance with the other arts, poetry is seen as a ubiquitous creative activity, arguably the oldest and most essential. As an art form whose primary medium is language—whether written, spoken, or sung—understanding its place in a culture entails not only training in linguistics and ethnology but also an appreciation of literature in its broadest sense along with findings from other academic disciplines ranging from astronomy to zoology.

Commensurate with Webster's admission that he is not an English professor or a literary critic, I brought little training in linguistics and none in anthropology when I began my work in ethnopoeitics. Thus my learning curve continues to grow, as I expect his will as well. He brings passion and intelligence to his task, and I hope he continues to build on what he has already mastered, because the material presented here begs for further detailed inquiry. As a thriving, dynamic resource for literary scholars, cultural critics, ethnographers, and linguists, Navajo poetry and poetics combine to teach us much about the literary process on a world stage, which Native American communities help to occupy, and I urge the author to remain an active participant in that exciting enterprise.

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