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is a collection of verse which must be read, her's is a voice that must be heard, for through the book and the voice we can all gain a fresh view of the way in which we must continue . . . for the sake of ourselves, and for the sake of future generations. To Wendy Rose: "Sister, thank you."

Ward Churchill
University of Colorado

Reading the Fire: Essays in the Traditional Indian Literatures of the Far West. By Jarold Ramsey. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983. 250 pp. \$16.95 Cloth.

"Understanding the form and pressure of, to use the dangerous word one more time, natives' inner lives is more like grasping a proverb, catching an allusion, seeing a joke—or, as I have suggested, reading a poem—than it is like achieving communion."

—Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (1983)

Proverbs, allusions, jokes, poems—daily literary texts, rather than religious epiphanies: what one admires in Jarold Ramsey's readings is how readable the scholarship can be, how human, how insightful. His work is academically grounded and yet open to reflection. "For myself, I was first drawn to the Western mythologies as a poet looking for new ways to imagine the American land, and what I found was the oldest way, whereby the Paiutes and the Blackfeet and the Tillamooks storied their lands as *home*" (xv). Here is a poet's professor with common sense, for once, in a field of exotic possibilities often going wrong. His premise is simple but hard to prove—the "native-traditional imagination can speak to Anglo-modern imagination after all." From Columbus and Cortez to Lawrence, Williams, Penn Warren, and Snyder, Americans have been asking over four centuries whether Native Americans can reciprocate a "native" consciousness, whether all of us can in any way share cultures. Ramsey's eleven chapters "interpret" the oral texts of a "native" American literary context. Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare stand on the horizon.

It is not easy to read the tribal fires. Promethean, indeed Lévi-Strausseau deadfalls fuel the flames between "our" culture and

"their" nature, which from the other side looks just the other way. The patterns, vitalities, enlightenments, transformations, and warming campfires shift contexts from culture to culture, kin to kin, region to region, time to time. Oral texts defy diachronic analysis or cross-sectional assurance about their "content"; they elude synchronic synthesis or trans-temporal certainty about their traditional "meaning." So, too, do most things human, though "literate" cultures pretend to know their words less conditionally.

Ramsey seems to have taken on the impossible American dream—to read thousands-of-years-old aboriginal firepits, imagining, à la Gaston Bachelard, the flames. The oral traditions of Indian cultures involve processes, more than products, "textures" as Barre Toelken says, more than "texts," and history has smudged much, erased more. There simply were no written phonetic language systems north of the Rio Grande, as we know them anyway, until somewhere into the 19th century, when non-Indians encouraged written translations of sacred texts such as the Bible, so that in 1821 Sequoyah, the Cherokee scholar for whom redwoods are named, codified an 86-character syllabary for one of five hundred spoken languages in the contiguous United States (though Gordon Brotherston in *Image of the New World: The American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts*, 1979, reminds us that wampum belts, winter counts, totem poles, sand-paintings, and designs in weaving as well as pottery *did* code myths and messages among many tribes).

So it is a Heraclitean undertaking, if not a risky cross-cultural process, for Ramsey to interpret "Traditional Indian Literatures of the Far West"—a broader sequel, in a sense, to his *Coyote Was Going There: Indian Literature of the Oregon Country* (1977). This is a literary critic interested in more than the latest French fad. The methods in such an old/new literary field vary as the hundreds of tribal cultures represented; literary Indian Studies emerge as a folkloric-anthropological-literary breed (among a dozen or so disciplines established in white Academic Studies) out of older ethnography begun by Euro-Americans such as Boas, Sapir, Radin, Parsons, and Densmore to newer socio-linguistics or "ethnopoetics" by Hymes, Bright, Tedlock, Bierhorst, and Norman. As Ramsey confesses in the last chapter of *Reading the Fire*, with a nod toward contemporary Indian writings, "my main

bent is to explore the art and wisdom of traditional oral narratives and songs, in so far as this is possible given the inherent problems of loss in transcription, loss in translation, and loss through our ethnological ignorances" (181).

How does one go about this? In such literary reclamation there is some due measure of the Parry-Lord thesis on oral formulaic composition (*The Singer of Tales*, 1960) that moves toward recreated models and retranslations of mistranslated myths and texts, as offered by Dell Hymes' "*In Vain I Tried to Tell You*": *Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics* (1981). Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1944), collating Greek myths and Blackfeet tales, may be the grandfather study in a field that necessitates native humility and a quick sense of humor. Whatever the scholarly differences, Greece to Eastern Europe to North America, the pursuit of authentic texts and creative cultural paradigms bonds these pioneering academics. So, too, the cultural anthropology of Victor Turner in *The Forest of Symbols* (1967) to the social anthropology of Clifford Geertz in *Interpretation of Cultures* (1975) support more tribally generated ethnology of such as Alfonso Ortiz, the San Juan anthropologist, in *The Tewa World* (1979), who continues where the Nez Percé Archie Phinney or the Lakota Ella Deloria left off with tribal self-studies. Revisionist history shores up the reasons for re-viewing the texts through such scholars as Gary Nash in *Red, White, and Black* (1974), or Francis Jennings in *The Invasion of America* (1975) or William Axtell in *The European and the Indian* (1981). These are not men to mince words, or to turn from thorny tasks, or to be entirely fooled by their own culture's biases, if those can be sorted out. Such studies as Vine Deloria's *Of Utmost Good Faith* (1971), or Calvin Martin's *Keepers of the Game* (1978) reexamine political and economic interrelationships layering Indian texts and contexts, while Sam Gill's *Native American Religion* (1982) or Åke Hulkrantz's *The Religions of the American Indians* (1979) sensitively resurrect, for whites, Indian religions and philosophies, yesterday and today. Keith Basso's *Portraits of "The Whiteman"* (1979) gives us a new look at ourselves and Indians, via socio-linguistics from an Apache point-of-view, and a cross-fertilizing study such as Ray A. Williamson's *Living the Sky* (1984) brings the new field of archaeoastronomy to bear on Indian mythologies. All these advances, new combinations, and reexaminations count toward better understandings of Indian-white (con)texts. Even the brilliantly fresh Parisian

semiotics of Tvetan Todorov in *The Conquest of America* (1982) fine tune the methods and models for such as Ramsey's work. The texts cannot be "read" without this field work.

Ramsey presupposes a conscious tribal audience—an oral readership in the civilized wilderness—who decodes an environment-as-a-culture, and in so doing the critic gives tribal peoples their rightful home and literatures, reversing the "wild" notion of illiterate aboriginals. Indeed, there is a consistent sweet reason in Ramsey's analyses, from Nez Percé Orphic myth, to Crow Old-Man-Coyote tale, to Chinookan Guardian Spirit legend. He is a good reader, probably a fine teacher, a grounded scholar.

The laudably readable aspect of Ramsey's approach is his integrative ability to react to the records, assimilate and distill many interdisciplinary methodologies, and come away with the literature still alive, indeed, to help the reader discover its life. "*Data brought back alive*"—this was Randall Jarrell's estimation of poetic truth in Williams, a working definition of literature, at any time, in any culture. Can it survive the critics? Can it translate or move the reader? Can it represent the integrity and genius of the originating culture? Do we know that we think we know when we read a Wishram Coyote tale? a Nez Percé Orphic myth? *How* are we to feel and know?

Empathy and good sense guide Ramsey's analyses: he assumes a cognizant tribal audience responding in "human" terms at least analogous with Western cultural literacy. His is consistently a comparativist study (Shakespeare, Homer, and Lévi-Strauss triangulate the West) granting consciousness, conscience, and aesthetic intention to readers in the not-so-unlettered "wilderness": "such cultivation of forms of imaginative self-consciousness in the audience is central to the artistry of traditional Western narratives" (20). Anyone who has heard a traditional telling, survived a night of Old Man tales, or participated in ceremonial dance and song knows this, in spite of mis-translations. Ramsey is always on the intercultural watch for Native American/EuroAmerican parallels, even in parodic form. He says, for example, of Black Elk's "High Horse Courting" tale, "It is a story that Sir Philip Sidney and Shakespeare, those connoisseurs of heroism tending to foolishness, would have relished, and worthy in theme and tone of the *Arcadia* or *As You Like It*" (135).

Although such comparisons cause one to ask for harder evidence than overlapping themes and resonant undertones, the effect is to place Indian materials in Western dialogues about literature, from Aristotle through Augustine and Sydney, to Derrida. Ramsey is never better than on Trickster in Chapter Two, "Coyote and Friends: An Experiment in Interpretive Bricolage." The following definition of the Old Man seems a classic that tops Radin's *Trickster* folklore: "an imaginary hyperbolic figure of the human, irrepressibly energetic and apparently unkillable, whose episodic career is based upon hostility to domesticity, maturity, good citizenship, modesty, and fidelity of any kind; who in Freudian terms is mostly id, a little ego, and no superego; who is given to playful disguises and shape-changing; and who in his clever self-seeking may accomplish important mythic transformations of reality, both in terms of creating possibility and in terms of setting human limits. From a structural standpoint, Tricksters are important mediative figures" (27).

Such a "mythic handy-man" helps put and keep the Indian world together, long or not-so-long ago; it is a delight, moreover an instruction, to find a critic who not only appreciates Old Man's balancing humor, improvisational skills, and cultural kinetics, but also makes use of them in his own "multiplex" approach to tending the fire. Ramsey's *Reading the Fire* belongs next to Brian Swann's collected essays in *Smoothing the Ground* (1983) as seminal studies of the ancient and on-going traditional oral texts of Native America. The larger critical ritual will be to correlate the old fires with the newly fired literary tools in Indian novels, poems, plays, and essays. We may be "descendants of Columbus," as Todorov warns, but "we are all natives now," in the words of Geertz's *Local Knowledge*. Elias Canetti, the Nobel German author, spoke in Munich in 1976 on the writer-scholar's place in today's world: the "early incomparable creations" of tribal peoples have been rescued by scholars in some measure, Canetti applauds, and "its true preservation, its resurrection to our life are up to the poet, the *Dichter*." This is our global "responsibility" to be "nourished by compassion" (*The Conscience of Words*, 1976). Ramsey's *Reading the Fire* is a step in the right direction.

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