

Brian Swann, ed. *Smoothing the Ground: Essays on Native American Oral Literature.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) xix, 364 pp., \$24.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

The red and black Chumash pictograph reproduced on the cover of *Smoothing the Ground* shows an alert human figure poised amidst a group of animal and bird people, all related by the stars that are their hands and feet. As Ken Roemer, one of the contributors to this collection of essays on Native American ethno-poetics, says: "The constellation tales give listeners relatives in the sky." Stories, like starfeet, reflect this kinship.

Smoothing the Ground, edited by Northumbrian poet Brian Swann, head of Humanities at The Cooper Union, is a groundbreaking study in the literary arts of North American and Mesoamerican Indians. The twenty full essays comprising this volume raise a variety of questions about the nature of the relationships between tribal people, their land, and their languages.

Swann's anthology has a broader scope than any of the other fine books available, such as *Traditional American Indian Literatures* or *In Vain I Tried to Tell You*, which address many of the same concerns. Discussing tribal cultures as diverse as Clackamas Chinook, Zuni and Nahua, the scholars included in this text employ a variety of approaches to traditional material. Despite there being no Native American scholars represented here, for which Swann apologizes, for the most part these authors have solid literary sensibilities and close contact with native poets and storytellers. Regrettably Swann has not included an index and comprehensive bibliographical resources, but the two essay-specific bibliographies and the Clackamas Chinook and Hopi dual-language texts do provide substance and point the way towards new directions in American Indian literary criticism.

Native American literatures are oral at heart, even when written. These essays show the complexity and durability of oral traditions, countering the popular misconception that Indian stories are childish or quaint. Paul Zolbrod, a scholar of Navajo poetics, says: "One of the lingering effects of racism here in America . . . is that literary critics and trained scholars have not yet understood the important place poetry occupies among Indians. Because most of us have been trained to associate literature with print, we have dealt exclusively with what has been composed in writing." What Zolbrod refers to as "the important place poetry occupies among Indians" is the way in which poetry (song, chant, narrative) is lived, is enacted in the tribal community where the "audience" participates in recreating the event described in the story. Dennis Tedlock considers oral narrative to be dramatic poetry because of this performative dimension to the literature. And Karl Kroeber in his essay "The Wolf Comes: Indian Poetry and Linguistic Criticism,"

makes the point that poetry which often is spoken in a sacred ceremonial context is part of the reality which it voices: "For Indians, there was immediate, practical, continuous back-and-forth flow and interpenetration of actuality and representation of reality . . . Ceremonies are physically continuous with both personal and tribal existence, 'realizing' rather than 'standing for' the actualities they celebrate. Indian 'drama' cannot be separated from Indian 'non-dramatized' life."

These understandings of the centrality of literature to culture and to spiritual life contrast sharply with the Western view of the text as literary artifact, decontextualized, deconstructed, self-referential, speaking to itself only of itself. Thus students of Native American literature need to know the context of a narrative in order to discern meaning within the story. In addition to details of performance, the context of a story always includes the history of the land where the story was born.

Kenneth Lincoln points out in the lead essay for *Smoothing the Ground* that Indians consider poetry "as survival." Indians have sung to maintain their spiritual sense of connectedness with the earth even in the worst of times, enduring relocation, termination, genocide. Serving to critique Euroamerican culture and to reveal life-perpetuating values such as respect for the animal and plant people who provide food and herbs necessary for life, songs and stories are life-affirming as Hymes, Nichols, Ramsey and Kroeber emphasize. Like water, stories flow in the blood of the people, infusing them with the basic life-substances.

In the search for more effective ways to translate oral literature well, and to speak critically from within a field of study that is necessarily interdisciplinary—encompassing linguistics, ethnology, music—the authors here scrutinize diverse issues such as the exploitation of sacred materials for scholarly purposes and the relationship between story and ecological ethics. Although there is some common ground in these enquiries, a healthy debate rages about the degree to which one may appropriate tribal knowledge for academic ends. Swann concludes his anthology with an interchange between Karl Kroeber and H. David Brumble III stressing the importance of this topic, but also leaving the reader with the impression that Brumble's undignified quibblings are somehow acceptable.

It is crucial that people as heavily stereotyped and mythologized as Native Americans speak for themselves—and that others in kinship relations, like badger, elk and grizzly bear, be listened to also. As Swann notes in the introduction, Indian stories are meaningful because they are alive and fluid and help all of us relearn values which bind us to living. The power that the old Cheyenne storytellers received from the natural world as they smoothed the ground in preparation for speaking is the creative life-energy of truth of place. With perhaps a similar

understanding of continuity, a Zuni once asked Dennis Tedlock: "When I tell these stories do you picture it, or do you just write it down?"

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Ronald Takaki. *Pau Hana*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983) 213 pp., \$14.95 cloth, \$7.95.

Pau Hana is a refreshing change from the usual genre of ethnic materials expressing the dynamics of culture set within an historical context; it is an exciting sequential analysis of the various ethnic peoples who provided plantation labor for the Hawaiian cane fields from the 1860s to the 1920s. Using primary resources, songs, historical tracts, and census data, Takaki brings together the various ethnic perspectives into a cogent account of the history, culture, and economy of sugar cane plantation existence.

From early beginnings to the decline of "king sugar," Takaki presents the Euroamerican perception of Native Hawaiians, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Norwegians, and Filipinos and attempts to keep the ethnic groups isolated to prevent any unified strike-action against plantation owners' unfair labor practices. Integrated into this history are ethnic viewpoints of contract labor and the treatment they received by their white bosses, creating a well-balanced presentation. From immigration to plantation, the various ethnic groups entertained the idea of permanency in Hawaii, finding a new home for their families and growing in cross cultural understanding.

Pau Hana documents culture retention, transition, and change as Takaki explains the development of Hawaiian pidgin English, plantation economics, social gatherings, religion, and family development. Throughout the story, one becomes involved with the various peoples and the landowners as their experiences unfold. The oppressive labor conditions change. The laborers show strength and ingenuity as they fight management whenever possible. The strength of character and understanding of one's culture crosses ethnic boundaries as the various groups work together for a better living and sense of becoming a part of Hawaii's agricultural economy.

Songs and personal diaries create a moving, live portrait of a vital economic and cultural historical period. By illustrating the unique qualities a multicultural perspective brings to an event, Takaki portrays the multiethnic experience. Clearly, Hawaii's history is replete with both