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Mystery novels to Choctaw Pageant

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## MYSTERY NOVELS TO CHOCTAW PAGEANT

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As the importance of ethnic minority texts gradually increases in American literature, the question of which texts should be considered part of an ethnic literary tradition becomes unavoidable. Knowing that no single definition will account for all possibilities and satisfy everybody, this essay will still try to provide a working platform from which to evaluate the relatedness of texts to that body of texts for which the term Native American literature is currently the most frequently used. It will therefore outline some of the problems connected with an attempt to define Native American literature and then proceed to suggest a solution.

### THE (RE-)SEARCH FOR NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

Point One: Native American literature did not exist before Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. This may sound odd since authors of American Indian descent like John Rollin Ridge, Mourning Dove, and D'Arcy McNickle had published novels and short fiction before Momaday was even born. However, they hardly received a substantial critical response to their works. "Native American literature" was not perceived as an interrelated corpus of texts. Therefore, when *House Made of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, it was ubiquitously hailed as the first novel by a Native American. The book triggered off a host of publications by Native American authors, so the tag is still fitting in that it

preceded a new subcategory of ethnic writing. In terms of literary history, the tag of “first Native American novel” has since been tugged upstream and is now docked at John Rollin Ridge’s *Life of Joaquin Murieta* (1857); the earliest literary texts written by Native Americans that we know of today date back to the 1600s. What this means is that the corpus of texts subsumed under Native American literature is expanding in two directions. Not only are authors constantly adding new texts, but other, earlier texts are also being republished and made available, some of them, like Ella Deloria’s novel *Waterlily*, for the first time. For Native American literature, therefore, literary history proceeds both ways from *House Made of Dawn*. Any attempt to discuss contemporary and particularly older Native American texts in the context of their literary history must necessarily also take into account their (post-)colonial context.

Point Two: When in the 1970s scholars started looking for pre-Momaday specimens of “Native American literature,” they usually followed the “paramount storyline” (Clifton 1989:31)<sup>1</sup> adopted by many anthropologists and other scholars, which lamented the inevitable destruction of Native American communities. Unwillingly continuing the stereotype which saw Native Americans in the arts as limited to “Indian” material culture, folklore, and the oral tradition, they usually combined a biographical approach with a search for “Indian” topics. The results were predictable. In the first major study on Native American fiction, Charles Larson (1978) unearthed several novels of doubtful authorship while overlooking a number of other books like John Rollin Ridge’s *The Life of Joaquin Murieta* (1857), a populist piece of cloak-and-dagger fiction with hardly any “Indian” content. There are—horrible dictu—some rather condescending passages about the comically uncivilized “Digger” Indians. According to the rules set by the post-1960 paramount storyline, *Murieta* hardly qualifies as Native American literature at all. The question of “Indian” vs. non-“Indian” material, setting, and plot constitutes yet another problem in identifying the corpus of literary texts called Native American literature. In the second wave of research for Native American texts, the usual approach taken was biographical. If authors claimed or were found to be of Native heredity, their products were considered to be Native American literature.

Point Three: The biographical approach brought up the question of who is an “Indian” author, a question that by its own phrasing fails to pay proper attention to the fact that many Native Americans identify themselves as members of their own nation, but not as “Indians” nor as Americans or Canadians (Feest 1983:93ff). The term “Indian” authorship presupposes a pan-Indian body of literary texts as well as a concept of intertribal or metatribal sense of identity with the open space between the tribes being inhabited by individuals who live a pan-Indian identity with no particular tribal affiliation. Scott Momaday’s belief that “an Indian is an idea which a given man has of himself” (1975:79) involuntarily left additional space for “Indian” authors like Jamake Highwater, who certainly was a result of his own idea of himself.<sup>2</sup>

The problem, it seems, is not easy to solve. In another attempt to come to terms with “Native American (respectively Canadian) literature,” Thomas King, in his introduction to the first anthology of Canadian Native fiction, cautiously suggested: “Perhaps our simple definition that Native literature is literature produced by Natives will suffice for the while providing we resist the temptation of trying to define a Native” (1986:5). This fairly broad definition, however, leads to the classification of Canadian Métis authors with Native Indians regardless of their different ethnic self-image. Arnold Krupat’s approach is certainly more pertinent. Krupat suggests that “Indians must be culturally Indian, with such cultural ‘identity’ not wholly a random or arbitrary choice (e.g., the Indian person having some actual heredity link to persons native to America)” (1990:207). Pointing in the same direction is a definition formulated by Brian Swann, stating, “Native Americans are Native Americans if they say they are, and”—and this appears to be the crucial point in a societal form that still relies more on the community than on the individual—“if other Native Americans say they are and accept them” (1988:xx).

Attempting to eliminate an author’s Native heredity as one of the constituting factors of North American Native literature does not seem to make much sense (even though some of the biographical studies in James Clifton’s *Being and Becoming Indian* [1989] seem to point in this direction). There is, however, ample reason to relativize the importance of “blood” as a literary kinship marker. The idea that a certain “blood” percentage (however inadequately measured) or blood relationship alone shape an author’s perception of the world bears (at least to a German critic like myself) unpleasantly racist implications. To add to the confusion, some authors like Frank Waters, who has been said to be “part Indian” (Adams 1987:935) or to have “a small part Cheyenne blood” (Davis 1976/77:62), or not to be of Indian ancestry at all (Cook 1977:4) have never expounded on their Indian bloodline, while authors of black and Indian mixed descent like Alice Walker are usually categorized as “black.” Certainly in most of her works Alice Walker’s commitment is unilaterally with black Americans, leaving no doubt but that she rightfully should be placed with the Afroamerican literature section. But Melba Boyd’s essay on Walker’s novel *Meridian* (Boyd 1990) casts some doubt on this sort of categorization, at least as far as *Meridian* is concerned. Boyd uses the term “mestizo” for persons of mixed ethnic origin like Walker and herself who are “living on the edge of American ambiguity” (115). Rather than introduce new interethnic terminology, Fredrik Barth in his study *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* observed that given certain conditions a person may change his or her ethnic affiliation (1969:21ff). More conceivably in the context of literature, a person of mixed origin may choose to write one text from the perspective of one group of his/her origin, and another text from a second or even third. With reference to the definition of Native American literature, this would suggest a focus on individual books.

But even with useful definitions (like the ones by Krupat and Swann) to identify

Native American authors, the question of Native American texts remains rather open. As far as contemporary literary efforts are concerned, Arnold Krupat again offers a definition that appears useful, but focuses primarily on the conditions of literary production:

*Indigenous literature* I propose as the term for that form of literature which results from the *interaction* of local, internal, traditional, tribal, or “Indian” literary modes with the dominant literary mode of the various nation-states in which it may appear. Indigenous literature is that type of writing produced when an author of subaltern cultural identification manages successfully to merge forms internal to his cultural formation with forms external to it, but pressing upon, even seeking to delegitimize it. (Krupat 1989.214)

While the above definition would also rule out many early texts written by Native missionaries and students, it would still include works like Momaday’s dissertation on the American poet Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, who influenced Momaday’s poetry. One result of the interaction between dominant culture and indigenous person not covered by Krupat’s definition is also scholarly books or articles written by authors with Indian forebears. In contrast, Jack Forbes’s attempt to see as contemporary Indian literature mainly “the discourse appearing in ‘Indian published periodicals’—poetry and fiction, some of the time, to be sure, but most often nonfictional, topical writing” (in Krupat 1990:206)<sup>1</sup> would exclude most of the novels, poetry, and short fiction commonly being read (and taught in classes) as “Native American literature.”

Furthermore, one of the basic principles of Native American societies has always been to place community before the individual. So what if a piece of literature is specifically aimed at a readership that does not perceive of the author as homeless, be it transcendently or not? If Native American Indian social life is more community-oriented than Euroamerican social life, should not, then, the question of what is and what is not Native American literature be approached from the same angle? By analogy to Swann’s definition of “Indian,” a piece of Native American literature would have to proclaim itself to belong with this group of texts, and it would have to be accepted as such by Native Americans or even Native American communities. Perhaps looking at the whole problem from the perspective of the individual piece of literature and its intended interpretive community or communities (Schöler 1987:27; Fish 1980:331) might provide a workable solution. At the same time it should of course be kept in mind that the response by the respective interpretive communities also plays a role in the creation not only of narrative meaning, but also in the grouping of a text within a class or section of literature or outside it. Lastly, conventions of genre (which in turn depend on the expectations of the intended audience) shape a text. Together, the criteria of intention, genre, and response should provide a workable basis from which to evaluate texts.

This (to some extent provisional) essay will therefore attempt to approach the problem of defining Native American Literature on the basis of the individual text. In doing so, it will (re-)introduce Todd Downing (1902–74), who was a remarkable man of

letters, scholar, and teacher of Choctaw descent and whose career in writing spans not only fifty years but also a variety of genres.<sup>4</sup>

### THE WRITING CAREER OF TODD DOWNING

Todd Downing, born in 1902 to a well-to-do family in Atoka, Oklahoma (in 1902 still in the Choctaw Nation), was an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation and spoke Choctaw fluently (Smith 1983:247ff). With nine mystery novels published between 1933 and 1941 (Hagen 1969:123) and numerous other publications Todd Downing remains one of the most prolific Native authors to the present day.

Downing's career as an author included many different kinds of writing for a variety of audiences or interpretive communities. As a student at the University of Oklahoma, he wrote a gossip column for the Oklahoma Daily under the pen-name "Professor Hoorle." His M.A. thesis won a national prize and the annual award of the Institute de las Españas for excellence in Spanish studies. From 1927 to 1934, Downing worked as business manager and review author for *Books Abroad*. The first review he wrote touched on a Native American subject, but this may well have been coincidence (Downing 1927:26). Not until the later years of Downing's employment with *Books Abroad* do his articles show a focus of interest on two particular fields, one of them being the mystery novel, the other being Mexico, with special attention to Indian cultures. In his crime novels, Downing combined the two; all except *Death Under the Moonflower* use Mexico for at least part of their setting (Hubin 1984:122). The Indian content of his first novel, *Murder on Tour* (Downing 1933), however, is limited to Aztec waitresses, the ruins of Toltec and other Mexican cultures, and the fact that the murderers have also been stripping ancient gravesites. Their robbery not only means the loss of archaeological material, but also enhances the danger of an Indian uprising:

Among the ignorant ones, the country people, there are strange rumors. In Oaxaca the story goes about that the old kings are returning after their sleep of centuries—to sit upon their thrones. It is said that in Tzintzuntzan the Tarascans wait for their ancient capital to be established again. You understand the danger—to us (Downing 1933:73)

The case is solved in time to prevent a possible uprising of Indians and other "ignorant ones," an attitude that reminds one of John Rollin Ridge's "Digger" (Miwok) Indians in *Murieta*. As it is, nothing in *Murder on Tour* would indicate or make the reader guess that the author himself could be of Indian descent.

*The Cat Screams* (Downing 1934) is different. Downing achieves density of structure by limiting the story's space and the number of characters, and he creates atmosphere largely through the use of Mexican Indian folklore, including allusions to a possibly supernatural background to the several ghastly murder cases. The witchcraft-

world of Indian *brujos* and *curanderas* is present throughout. A small clay figure of the Mexican god Xipe plays a significant role in the solution of the case, and Indian myths and cultures are treated with reverence, even though the servant boy whose illness confines the characters of the novel to their quarantined hotel dies not of a curse but acute appendicitis. With the density of its form, its respectful treatment of indigenous material and its rather hideous drug-related killings, *The Cat Screams* reads like a predecessor of Tony Hillerman's novels in topic and form if not in style and tone. The main difference from Hillerman's novels is that the main protagonist is white: "A man with a white skin, he [the detective Hugh Rennert] told himself, had no business thinking in this country" (1933:121). The difference is one of genre convention and audience expectations. Hillerman (non-Native) is able to use characters like Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee because under 1970s and '80s conditions his national and international audience will accept them as amiable and believable. Downing (Native) depicted Hugh Rennert (who appears in *Murder on Tour* as well) as interested in Mexican cultures and able to speak "the soft Mexican tongue" (1933:64) but apparently guessed that his audience would accept a police officer of Indian origin only in the form of a slightly comical Mexican: "Backed against the wall of the washroom was the Aldamas police officer who looked like a pure-blood Indian, acted like an Andalusian and was named Miguel O'Donojú which is Spanish for Michael O'Donohue" (Downing 1941:221ff).

*The Cat Screams* was Downing's most successful book; it was not only chosen as a selection for The Crime Club but also republished in Great Britain, Sweden, and Germany. Unfortunately, Downing did not continue in the vein of *The Cat Screams* but reverted to mysteries more like *Murder on Tour*, the last of which was *The Lazy Lawrence Murders*, published in 1941. After his contract with Doubleday had expired, Downing worked as an advertising copywriter and edited *Pan Americanismo*, the monthly magazine of the Pan-American Association of Philadelphia (Smith 1983:247).

For the purposes of this essay it is important to notice that so far all of Downing's writings had been aimed either at specialized groups (students, readers of foreign books) or at a national and international audience. None of the published works discussed bears any marks by which the reader could have identified Downing as Native American. Epistemological or discourse structures denoting Downing's Choctaw experience are simply absent. This does not mean to imply that Downing ever tried to deny the Choctaw part of his heritage; he was, for example, a member of Okla-she-da-ta-ga, the Indian club of the University of Oklahoma. This Choctaw side is just never mentioned on the book covers or in the texts. *The Cat Screams* does suggest an intimate knowledge of Indian material but contains no direct or indirect indication of its author's ethnic background. Writing for different audiences as he did, Downing was held by the expectations of these audiences and the genre conventions of his time.

In 1940 Doubleday published Downing's first volume-length piece of nonfiction. *The Mexican Earth* (1940) is not so much a travel account as an Indian history of Mexico.

What is new in terms of the relationship between reader, author, and text is that in *The Mexican Earth* Downing identifies himself as a Native person. The particular sequence relates his encounter with an American student of the Aztec language and indigenous art in the summer school of the National University of Mexico:

The high light of her day seemed to be the time she had joined ("horned in on" I would have said) a family of Indians at their midday meal. . . . "I hate to think of going back home," she told me over her filet mignon. "I'd like to live down here, where I could be with Indians all the time. I think it's wonderful—the way they're coming into their own." And on and on. . . . I said: "You have Indians out in California, don't you?" She frowned. "Oh, that's different. They're not—well, yes, I guess they are the same race. But—" The young man who was my host rattled silverware and introduced a new topic of conversation. . . . Later, in his room, he laughed and said to me: "Miss Blank is quite a card, isn't she? Uh—you understood she was just kidding you, of course. She knew all the time that you're Indian yourself." (Downing 1940:9ff)

In this passage Downing takes sides, and he chooses the side of the indigenous Mexicans. The problem he addresses, however, is not so much one of personal identity but of that peculiar position the "Indian" holds in society.

Indian. *Mestizo*. White. In these days of so much chest thumping and shouting in parade-ground voices about race, it seems futile to try to get in a sane word on the subject, even if that word be confined to the problems of Mexico. Paradoxically, consideration of the question there is made more difficult by the fact that, so far as the American tourist is concerned, surface appearances show the question to be settled fair and square and to the greater glory of the Indian. He has been "taken up" enthusiastically, his virtues worried out of him and extolled. The Americans who were so articulate during the Díaz dictatorship thirty years ago still stay with the beer and skittles of the changeless American colony but are seldom heard from now. Yet I find an individual of this passé type only a little more irksome than the one who puts too much effort into letting the world know that he is free of prejudice. At home he exclaims loudly. "Why, some of my best friends are Jews!" In Mexico he waxes sentimental over every pot in a market place, defective or not, simply because it is Indian. His words do not ring true to an Indian of Oklahoma I doubt that they do to an Indian of Mexico. (8–9)

Downing sums up his contemplations: "The person likely to be most free of prejudice is the one who is unconcernedly silent about race and nationality and creed" (9). This, apparently, was his ideal.

Downing considered *The Mexican Earth* to be his most important book, and the National Library of Mexico called it "one of the best books published in English about Mexico" (Bolen 1973). *The Mexican Earth* was aimed at a national audience (as were Downing's crime novels), but in terms of genre conventions its form was more open to personal statements. Calling attention to the fact that the author himself is an Oklahoma Indian, Downing pointedly draws a line of difference between himself and his audience. Read as a book by an American Indian author, *The Mexican Earth* belongs to a different field of literary experience than the crime novels by the same author, whose Indian iden-

tity is not mentioned. With *The Mexican Earth* Downing joined those Native American authors that like him and before him had tried to educate a generally non-Native readership about Indian problems and issues.

According to one source (Gridley 1947:33) Downing was writing a non-mystery novel in the early 1940s. The manuscript appears to have been lost after Downing's death in 1974, so there is no way to tell whether it touched on Native issues and used Indian characters or not. Either he did not complete it or it suffered the same fate as Ella Deloria's *Waterlily* and was rejected by the publishers. The 1940s and '50s apparently were not particularly suited for the publication of novels by Native American authors, let alone the establishment of the Native American novel as a distinct ethnic genre. Even though the first decades of the century had seen an upsurge in Native American literary activity, "creative writing played only a small role in Indian literature until the later 1960s" (Peyer 1990: vii). Authors like John Milton Oskison, John Joseph Mathews, and D'Arcy McNickle had published during the 1920s and '30s, and then they were not identified as Native American authors on the dust jackets of their books (Larson 1978:3). On a national scale, a pan-Indian readership hardly existed, and the very sort of romantic racism Downing criticized in *The Mexican Earth* prevented the recognition of the increasing number of texts by authors of Indian descent. Publishers and general audience likewise could or would not conceive of American Indians as authors of novels.

In Oklahoma, things were somewhat different. A large percentage of the population was either Native Indian or of tribal descent, and after more than a hundred years of tribal written culture, Native American literary production was apparently taken for granted. Considerable numbers of Indian readers also meant that Oklahomans took notice of the efforts of Native authors. In 1936, an article in the *Chronicles of Oklahoma* by Muriel Hazel Wright, herself a noted Choctaw historian, had mentioned Todd Downing alongside Will Rogers, Lynn Riggs, John Joseph Mathews, and John Oskison (Wright 1936:161). In 1939, a brief sketch of Downing's life and writing career before the war appeared in the *Handbook of Oklahoma Writers* (Marable/Boylen 1939:9ff). In 1951, Wright again mentioned him in her *Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma*: "Choctaw prominent in the history of the Indian Territory and Oklahoma since 1898 include . . . Todd Downing, novelist" (1951:114). On this regional scale, the novels by Oskison and Mathews as well as the newspaper columns by Rogers, Posey, and others were read by Natives and non-Natives alike, and generally the authors were approved of by their respective communities. From the variety and number of publications one may even conclude that on a regional Oklahoma level Native American literature existed (and had established itself firmly) in the 1800s. Since Downing wrote mostly on Mexico and used Mexican settings he would not seem to fall in this category, but, as the above quotations prove, he was known and considered important as an Oklahoma Indian who had become a celebrity as an author.

After his return to Atoka to care for his parents, Downing worked as a high

school teacher. One more mystery story appeared in 1945 (Downing 1945). Since there were no reprints of his earlier works knowledge about them gradually declined.

A regional result of the upsurge in the political awareness and self-confidence of American Indians during the 1960s was the establishment of the Choctaw Bilingual Education Program which hired Downing. Downing, by now almost seventy years old, had always expressed the opinion that “belonging to two or more cultures doubles your enjoyment of life” (Morrison 1975:416). He was obviously the right man in the right place. His sister Ruth remembers that “He was happiest when teaching in this program” (personal communication).

Concentrating his efforts on the region and on the Choctaw Nation meant that Downing started writing for yet another audience in his career as an author. His Choctaw-language course *Chahta Anumpa* (Downing 1971) was first published as a serial in the *Atoka Indian Citizen*. Nobody seems to have been more surprised by the immediate success of this series than the author himself. In the foreword to the third edition, he wrote,

Many moons ago (as Choctaws do not say) Mr. B. R. Cook . . . suggested that I write a series of Choctaw lessons for his newspaper. I hesitated. “Do you think many people would be interested?” I asked, having had experience in turning out manuscripts in which few people *were* interested. . . . To my surprise, Mr. Cook decided to run the entire series three times, to meet the demands of readers who wanted a complete file of the lessons. These developed into the present *Chahta Anumpa*—and now it is going into a third edition. (1971:4)

Downing designed *Chahta Anumpa* to serve as a combined introduction to language and culture alike. It included stories about the great nineteenth-century leader Pushmataha as well as the Choctaw creation myth and the Lord’s Prayer in the Choctaw language. Written for publication in a newspaper read by Natives and non-Natives, it reached a wider audience than language courses created specifically for use in the classrooms. However, *Chahta Anumpa* was adopted for language teaching courses not only at Southeastern State College (now University), but also for Choctaw language courses at Vanderbilt University (Bolen 1973). Likewise, the pageant *Journey’s End*<sup>3</sup> was written for Downing’s home community—in other words, for an intended audience that was regionally specific but not limited in terms of linguistic or ethnic group:

We reenact some of the great scenes from Choctaw history: the confrontation of Pushmataha and Tecumseh in 1811; the signing of the treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1831, the wintertime removal of our people to new homes across the Mississippi River, the signing of the Atoka Agreement in 1897; and the final merging of Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory into the State of Oklahoma in 1907. (Downing 1971:15)

The performances of *Journey’s End* needed and found the cooperation of both Choctaws and non-Indians, even though the text is not without bitterness. For example, the Choctaws are shown to have been forced into signing away their lands in the treaty of Dancing

Rabbit Creek, while greedy whites are already waiting on their doorsteps. Not only that; history seems to repeat itself when the same wording is used before the Atoka Agreement is signed:

Hardwick: Well, some of them are bellyachin'—sayin' this is their land and they've got treaties with the Federal Government guaranteein' their right to it. But old Andy [President Andrew Jackson] has put it to 'em straight from the shoulder. . . . So it's in [their] best interest to go peaceable. . . . I've got my eye on old Noxabee's place. Rich bottom land with a good house and the best live stock in these parts. (Act I, Scene 1)

Harding: Well, some of them are bellyachin'—sayin' this is their land and they've got the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek guaranteein' their right to it. But their Governor, Green McCurtain, has put it to 'em straight from the shoulder. . . . So it's in their best interest to go peaceable. . . . I've got my eye on a good Boggy Bottom farm. The owner's a sick old woman and I can bamboozle her easy. (Act II, Scene 6)

These accusing scenes stand in somewhat awkward contrast to the pageant's finale where the entire cast (and, probably, the audience) sings "Oklahoma." Considerations concerning the prospective audiences and sponsors of the performances probably helped shape the text to a certain degree. The pageant was, after all, presented and perhaps sponsored by the Atoka County Historical Society and the Atoka County Chamber of Commerce and attended not only by Choctaws but also by the non-Indian inhabitants of the Atoka region. A more radical version of the text is easily imaginable, considering not so much the history of Choctaw-white relations but the radical rhetoric of the day as used by the spokespeople of militant Native groups like AIM. This rhetoric of conflict, however, can be used only where antagonisms are either already at hand or intended. Downing even refrained from making dramatic use of the Battle of Boggy Depot near Atoka, where on February 13, 1864, Union soldiers had massacred wounded Confederate Indians. On the other hand, he also declined to enliven the scenery with Choctaw dances or anything of the kind.

*Journey's End* is not a particularly well-integrated piece of literature. In fact, it seems to have been written rather hastily, so that the predicaments of working for a multiple audience remain visible in their effect on the text. Choctaw grievances over white men's greed on the one hand and "Oklahoma" on the other stand in curious contrast.

The problem of a multiple audience with differing demands that Downing was facing on a regional scale when he wrote *Journey's End* is by and large the same all contemporary Native American authors face. If they want to be accepted not only by their own communities but by an intertribal and pan-Indian audience and by a mixed audience on a national or even international scale, they have to shape their texts carefully according to the demands of their audience(s). Homogeneous audiences like the ones Downing had written for during his early career in the 1930s do not pose such problems. To his home audience, Downing was not only a distant "Indian" author but a well-known member of

the community. The influence of such an audience of course by far exceeded that of a general national audience like the one that read *The Mexican Earth*.

### DIFFERENT AUDIENCES AND “NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE”

The problem of a double or multiple audience and of presenting literary pieces that are read, understood, and accepted by all parts of their audience(s) leads back to the contemplation of the range and types of Native American literature this essay started with. As has been pointed out, Downing's various works—ranging from a master's thesis and scholarly book reviews to advertising copy, from mystery novels and an Indian history of Mexico to a pageant and a language course—were written for a number of different audiences. These audiences were all addressed in different ways, and their demands as well as certain genre conventions were instrumental in shaping the texts. The pageant *Journey's End* was seen and performed by both Native and non-Native inhabitants of the Atoka region; the language course was primarily of importance to Choctaws. The crime novels and stories of his early career were meant for a general audience on a national level, as was *The Mexican Earth*. In his youth, when working with *Books Abroad*, Downing wrote book reviews for an intellectual audience; the same holds true for his work with *Pan Americanismo* and for the “Professor Hoople” columns. All of these works were written by the same person to whom the definition of “Native American author”—given the definition of American Indian heredity and, of course, his own statement in *The Mexican Earth*—obviously applies. On the other hand, none of Downing's texts would readily fit the commonly accepted image of Native American literature as determined by the successful works of Momaday, Silko, Erdrich, and Welch, which were written for an audience of mixed racial descent and ethnic identity.

The individual case of Todd Downing and the various relationships between him as author and the varying interpretive communities for his works suggests a model for a definition of Native American literature using a variable scale. At this point, seven types of texts that outline specific intended audiences and their responses are distinguishable.

1. Texts intended for a limited local or regional audience which is either (predominantly) Native or consists of different ethnic groups living in the same area, usually the writer's own people; these texts may be about Native or non-Native issues.
2. Texts intended for an extended (predominantly) Native audience, written on behalf of the writer's own people, about Native issues in general or about non-Native issues.
3. Texts intended for a larger non-Native audience, written on behalf of the writer's own people or about Native issues in general;

4. Texts intended for a general readership of mixed ethnic identity about Native issues, using Native characters, motives, material, etc.;
5. Texts intended for a specialized audience about non-Native issues;
6. Texts intended for a local, regional, or general audience without particular reference to Native issues.
7. Texts originally from a tribal, communal, or personal oral tradition, transcribed and edited.

The first group of works includes all Native regional newspapers, leaflets, and magazines, some of which are also read by non-Native audiences. This field is the closest to contemporary Native American everyday life; the authors usually reside in the community. Bilingual or monolingual Indian-language texts are most likely found here. This group of texts is the one that historically came first; also, the relationship between author and audience is closest in this group. One can agree with Jack Forbes (see above) that it forms the nucleus of Native American literature. *Chahta Anumpa* and most of Downing's articles for local newspapers come under this heading as well as, considering the special conditions in Oklahoma, *Journey's End*. In terms of genre, apart from journalistic texts and speeches, short forms (poetry, tales, sketches, short stories) dominate. A modern novel of predominantly regional importance to the Choctaws and their neighbors is John T. Webb's *Never On My Knees* (1988).

The second category includes most of what Jack Forbes (1987:3ff) wanted to see as the core of Native American literature: the magazines, newspapers, and booklets printed for a largely Native American audience by Native American publishers. Scholarly magazines like the *Wicazo Sa Review* that also reach a non-Native readership come also under this heading, as well as the few cases in which an author explicitly addresses only fellow Native Indians like Lee Maracle's *I Am Woman* (1988:11). Historically, this group is basically an extension of the first under the conditions of a postcolonial mass-media society.

Although they deal with Native American subjects and issues, works in the third group were—like Downing's *The Mexican Earth*—originally written for a generally non-Native audience but by authors who consciously and for a purpose identified themselves to their audience as being American Indians. It includes the works of most Native American authors, who, like Samson Occom, George Copway, and Charles Eastman were read by a general audience prior to 1960. One of the reasons for this of course is that Native American authors of this period could not count on a larger Native audience to be literate, let alone able to buy expensive books. Only those of their books that conformed to the audience's expectations were a success on the market. Because writing in this group does not necessarily require direct contact between the writer and his or her own community, authors posing as representatives of their nations like Copway (Smith 1988) or imposters of Native persons like Highwater/Markopoulos are most likely to be found in this group,

too. One has to keep in mind, though, that already an eighteenth-century author like Occom wrote for different audiences (see Peyer 1982:12, 193). Historically, the third group did not exist as “Native American literature” before the formation of a tentative canon of works in the 1970s and ’80s. Only then did these works gain additional importance as ancestral voices to works that largely belong with the fourth group according to the above system of classification. This literary heritage, however, does not conform to the definition of *tradition*. It is neither traditional in the sense of the old oral tradition nor really a literary tradition, since only a few authors were aware of their literary predecessors before their works were republished.

Works that are consciously written about or use Native issues and materials and that are intended for both Native and non-Native audiences on a larger scale compose the fourth category of texts. This is where the majority of contemporary authors would be listed, and this is the core of what Krupat calls “indigenous literature,” which in similar form exists under similar conditions also in countries like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Usually these works are read by a white audience (which is necessary for a success in the book market) as well as by members of the minority cultures—though the response may be different, as in the case of Charles Storm/Hyemeyohsts, whose *Seven Arrows* met with praise from the reviewers but was rejected by many Cheyenne (Costo 1972). Slowly, the formation of a tentative canon can be observed (Ruppert 1981:87) as authors like Momaday, Ortiz, Silko, Vizenor, and Welch are read, reread, taught, and to an extent also copied by younger writers who in turn enter the market with new publications (this process is visible for example in the collection *Touchwood*, edited by Gerald Vizenor).

The fifth group includes works like Downing’s M.A. thesis and Momaday’s dissertation or, more generally, all works by authors of Native descent in the natural sciences, business, law, and so on (except, of course, those which deal with specifically Indian-related themes and topics).

The sixth group consists of all those works by Native literary men and women who do not deal with Native issues or present their material from an expressedly Native Indian point of view. For example, a lot of Will Roger’s political satires and other journalists’ writings belong in this category as well as works of book length like Martin Cruz Smith’s (Seneca-Yaqui) *Gorky Park* (1981) or, for that matter, all of Todd Downing’s crime novels.

The seventh group, finally, is made up of texts that were originally part of an oral tradition, be it tribal, communal, or personal. It covers biographies and autobiographies (Krupat 1985:32) as well as ethnographic collections. Obviously, this inclusion leads into a grey zone: most of the collaborators on Native autobiographies were non-Natives; likewise, only few ethnographic collectors could claim a tribal heritage like Ella Deloria or William Jones.<sup>6</sup> Many texts in this group bear only a doubtful semblance to the oral originals they profess to represent.

All of these groups coexist, although the third is historically almost closed since there is no need any longer for tribal writers to write for audiences that do not include fellow Native Americans. Exploitive tracts that profess to teach American Indian religious secrets have fortunately been losing importance over the past years. Furthermore, imposers are more easily discovered today than even a few decades ago.

Together, the groups form a continuum rather than clearly defined sectors. As in the case of Todd Downing, one piece by an author may belong to the first group, another one to the fourth, still another to the fifth. In fact one and the same author may during his writing career cover all. One and the same piece may also belong to more than one category at the same time: as a text, the Nanabush-legends printed in the Anishinabe *The Progress* belong with group seven; since they appeared in an early tribal newspaper, they also belong with group one (Hochbruck 1991:168). Leslie Silko's *Storyteller* (1981), obviously a fourth-group collection, is also of regional importance to the Llagunas. Finally, individual pieces may change groups: should, for example, Todd Downing's *The Cat Screams* be reedited with an introduction pointing out the author's Choctaw heredity, this would affect the readers' perception of the text. The change of context and the presentation of the text to a new interpretive community would produce a substantial alteration in the reading of the text. Instead of a simple crime novel they would now read a crime novel by an Indian author, a reading which probably would give additional weight to the Indian material Downing incorporated into the text. *The Cat Screams* would shift from group six to four.

Looking at the present condition of Native American and Canadian Indian writing and publishing, the interaction between groups one, two, and four is apparent. An author may start writing for local newspapers and then get a chance to publish on a national level, or else an author of national renown may publish essays in American Indian publications of group two.

Groups five and six are usually not directed at a Native audience, nor do they touch Native issues or topics. Their relation to the focal term Native American literature is therefore based exclusively on the fact that they were written by authors of Native ancestry. According to the system suggested above, they are not evicted from the ranks of Native American literature, but neither are they given the same status as texts from the historical, sociocultural, and literary core of this indigenous literature.

To define "Native American literature" neither by topic alone nor by the quantity of Indian blood in a certain author alone, but along the criteria outlined above—that is by range, topic, intention, and intended audience—provides a base to evaluate any given text within the system and to arrive at conclusions as to its importance for the whole body of Native American literature. Silko's *Storyteller*, belonging to two groups, is apparently of more importance than Storm's *Seven Arrows* within this system, even though sales figures would suggest the opposite. To draw an analogy to Brian Swann's definition of "Indian": if a book by a Native American author is obviously intended as Native Ameri-

can literature, and if its audience (both Native and non-Native) reads and accepts this book as Native American literature and its author as Native American, then it should be accepted as such.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Arnold Krupat for pointing out this important essay to me as well as for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay. Thanks also to Beth Satre for revising the manuscript. The author takes responsibility for any remaining mistakes or inconsistencies.

2. Jamake Highwater, a.k.a. Gregory Markopoulos, a person of Greek origin who used the fact that a Blood elder adopted him into his family to pose as a Native American author for several years.

3. Krupat discusses an article by Jack Forbes, "Colonialism and Native American Literature: Analysis," which initially appeared in the *Wicazo Sa Review* (1987) 3:17-23.

4. A more extensive introduction to the life and works of Todd Downing will be included in a volume on Downing currently prepared for publication by this author. I am thankful to Ruth S. Downing and Nenad Downing, Chattanooga, and to Margaret Hames and Homer Blaker of Atoka, Oklahoma, for sharing their time, memories, and other information about Todd Downing with me.

5. The program leaflet of the 1971 performance identified Gladys Wilson and Cassie Williams as authors of Act II, Scene 1: 'Geary Station on the Butterfield Trail, September 1858'; and Scene 2: 'A Choctaw School 1860' respectively. A copy of the typescript was made available to the author by Margaret Hames.

6. The seventh group was left out in the original draft of this paper; however, I decided to include it after a discussion with Bernd Peyer.

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