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Paul Zolbrod. *Reading the Voice: Native American Oral Poetry on the Written Page.* Salt Lake City: Utah State University Press, 1995. xi + 146 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87480-457-7.

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This is a book about poetry: about its sacred underpinnings, its broad presence in everyday life, its necessity to the human community–all of which go largely unnoticed as the printed world and litera-ture move insidiously away from wide public view. (preface, vii)

With these words Paul Zolbrod opens his thought-provoking theoretical study of Native American oral poetry. By basing his observations on experiences gained while participating in the Navajo community and from witnessing numerous recitations of sacred poetry and performances of storytellers, Zolbrod proves that Native American oral poetry is as worthy of recognition as "Europe's print-driven legacy" (2), and he proposes that mainstream America can employ the knowledge gained by examining Native American poetry to recover its own poetic awareness, which is in danger of extinction during our electronic age.

In his introductory chapter Zolbrod expands the definitions of literary terms such as poetry, fiction, and drama; he urges his readers to move poetry off the written page–from school-books, anthologies, and periodicals–to include oral perfor-mances and even the "electronic poetry" of film. He also points out some key differences between the Euro-American and Native American cultures, namely that the indigenous cultures of the Americas did not distinguish between the secular and the sacred (12), whereas the Christian religion restricts its definition of sacred texts to the Bible and related hymns (20), and he calls for an expansion of the narrow Judeo-Christian definition of the sacred to include such texts as the American Declaration of Independence or the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (20).

In chapter 2, Zolbrod's case study of four sacred Iroquois texts reveals the deeply poetic nature of the Iroquois Story of Creation, the narrative and thematic unity of the Thank-You Prayer, the intrinsic poetic quality of the Dekanawide Myth, and the poetic surface of the Condolence Ritual. He effectively demonstrates that one should not dismiss these texts as mere myths. In chapters 3 and 4, Zolbrod presents alternative methods for classifying poetic texts according to voice and mode, presenting the categories of lyric poetry and colloquial poetry, the dramatic mode and the narrative mode in a new light, and his references to examples from the former biblical, Greek and Roman cultures as well as from contemporary American popular culture are helpful parallels for those readers who are uninitiated in Native American cultures. In chapter 5 he presents new methods for translating, analyzing, and classifying Native American poetry.

In closing Zolbrod asserts that "… to neglect poetry is to neglect what verbalizes the deepest, most essential condition of being human" (124). He laments that poetry has become a genre for academics who are more interested in publishing and gaining academic recognition than in teaching, and he adamantly criticizes the politicization of the literary canon according to race, class, gender, and cultural origin. The solution to this fragmentation, he suggests, lies in emphasizing the universality of poetry which projects a "greater-than-human reality" (124).

Interspersed throughout Zolbrod's study are frequent interjections such as "I bring no fixed theoretical position to this project save for offering a few opening definitions" (2); "I want to avoid making value judgments" (4); and "Please remember that what I present here is only a beginning" (35). Whereas some readers may deride Zolbrod for these seemingly indecisive statements, he is rather to be commended for his refusal to present his theories as absolute truth and for his open invitation for further discussion.

It is true, as Zolbrod proposes, that one must not rely on the written texts of contemporary Native American authors alone to reach a greater understanding of the indigenous American cultures (91). However, one must be careful not to belittle the contributions of these authors by stating, as Zolbrod does, that most of them "are mixed blood and products largely of creative writing courses and mainstream culture" (91). To my mind, the defini-

tion of 'Native American," just as the definitions of poetry and literature, must be expanded, thereby including those of mixed heritage who have learned to function in both the native and mainstream cultures. Furthermore, whereas Zolbrod's objectives are distinct and his efforts laudable, the structure of his study at times lacks clarity, as in the introductory chapter. Nevertheless, the concise and informative glossary offers a helpful reference guide which overcomes most of the confusion that the introductory chapter might have caused.

In spite of some shortcomings, Zolbrod's study of Native American oral poetry is a welcome contribution to the field of Native American Studies due to his refreshingly new approach and his assertions that Native American oral works are as valid and valuable as *Beowulf* or the works of Homer.

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