

Critique

Brito's article draws a necessary contrast between the purpose and function of American Indian chants, and the American Indian's descent into modern poetry. The latter is an idiom that can only voice anger and frustration: it symbolizes a spirit imprisoned, forced to protest through a borrowed medium because it seems to be the only one that the western mind can understand.

I was struck by several ironies in this essay. First, the chants cited by Brito remind us of the absolute confidence, pride, and reverence American Indians felt toward their world. They breathe the sacred air and see their skin darkened by the sacred sun. Coherence and fullness of vision, values associated with a mature spirituality, mark each chant, both structurally and thematically. Yet, as Brito stresses, the significance of these chants lies not merely in what they communicate but in their efficacy as tools of *social magic*. Indeed, their "unspeakable significance" is similar to that of the Vedic prayers of Hinduism, the spiritual home of Asian Indians; in Vedic ritual, the priest through skillful intonation and rendition could alter the very forces of nature herself, bringing humanity into greater harmony with the cosmic order, *rta*. Undoubtedly, the powers of American Indian orators derive from the same psychological sources as that of the Vedic priest and suggest the deep communion of both with divine energies.

Given this heritage of self-mastery and insight into the natural order, the ensuing history of American Indians projects almost unbearable irony, as the poems cited indicate. Contemporary American Indians are torn by the struggle to tell the rest of America "How We Are," to proclaim that they bear the blood of seers and shamans, and by the contempt any contract with the smug yet driven white culture elicits. The last poem, "Original American Blues," encapsulates this irony as Indians are instructed to "be colorful/be culturally enriching/to our school children/. . . be anything but yourself . . ." The trivialization of the profound, the secularization of the sacred, the sentimentalizing of the complex—these are the trite responses to diversity we have learned to expect from American institutions. As though one can "be colorful" on command without the blessing of the sacred sun; as though one can "be culturally enriching" without having access to evolving traditions shaped by the growth of individuals within a group.

Perhaps the deepest irony embedded in Brito's article is that at a time when American Indians need access to the powers of their

ancient chants, access that would facilitate their own integration and help heal the fragmentation of the larger culture, they are blocked. At the same time, since the chants are not vehicles of social protest in an ordered and beneficent universe, American Indians seem to be left no choice but to use forms alien to their traditions to express social and psychological conditions alien to their heritage. But as Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, *Ceremony* (1977), movingly illustrates, the magic of these ancient traditions lives on. And if the personal outrage of the poet or the despair of the outcast Indian can lead to a renewed sensitivity toward the old myths, whereby they reassume their harmonizing function, the exile from the past can be seen archetypically, as the result of an unsettling but vitalizing wind: "It was the wind that gave them life. When this ceases to blow we die. In the skin at the tips of our fingers we see the trail of the wind; it shows us where the wind blew when our ancestors were created."

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