

Articles

GIORGIO MARIANI

“Chief Seattle” versus Sherman Alexie: How Useful is Ecocriticism When We Read American Indian Literature?

Why place the nineteenth-century Indian leader after whom the city of Seattle is named and very little is actually known, next to a celebrated contemporary American Indian writer, who happens to have grown up on the Spokane Indian reservation of Wellpinit, a hundred miles east of Seattle, and who is currently a resident of that city?¹ Well, the sense of my apparently irreverent and chronologically absurd juxtaposition lies in the scare quotes around the name “Chief Seattle.” The Chief Seattle invoked by my title has little to do with the historical figure whose native name was Seathl, and who, as a chief of the Duwamish and Suquamish tribes, was one of the signatories of the Port Elliot Treaty of 1855 that opened vast areas of the Pacific Northwest coast of what is today the United States to white settlement. Instead, the Chief Seattle of my title is the figure described in an important essay published twenty years ago by Rudolf Kaiser, as “the prophet of an ecological sentiment that is said to be lacking in the Western industrialized nations,” one of the most famous “patron saints of a close relationship between man and his natural environment” (497). This rather mythical Chief Seattle is the author of a legendary speech that began to circulate widely in the U.S. and Europe around the late Sixties and early Seventies, and was quickly adopted by various organizations as an American Indian ecological manifesto. Without delving into the details of the rather intricate textual history of this document, let me just recall the conclusions reached by Kaiser’s careful study. Whereas in the earliest recorded version of the speech Seattle does touch on the relationship between the Indians and their lands, saying, for example, that “Every part of this country is sacred to my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some fond memory or some sad experience of my tribe,” it is only in a wholesale and avowedly fictitious rewriting of the “original” text that “Chief Seattle becomes a modern ecologist” (Kaiser 509).

Only in this later version of his speech may we read phrases such as these: “How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land?... The rivers are our brothers, they quench our thirst. The rivers carry our canoes, and feed our children.... The air is precious to the red man, for all things share the same breath...” (As quoted in Kaiser 525-26). In short, Chief Seattle’s speech would seem to belong to that rather objectionable – and for some outright shameful – history of appropriation of things Indian, or supposedly Indian, on the part of White America. As Shari Huhndorf has put it in her recent *Going Native* – a brilliant study of the role of Indians in the American cultural imagination – since the Sixties Indians have served “as another kind of tourist destination, this one offering a renewed connection to the earth and the hope of spiritual regeneration” (128). The fame enjoyed by “Chief Seattle’s Speech” both within ecological circles and among the general public provides ample evidence that Indians continue to be perceived as ecologically-minded by default, and always ready to treat us to beautiful words of environmental wisdom.

All of this, of course, should not be taken as an indication that only the so-called “White Man’s Indians” – the “invented” Indians who are to a large extent a product of the Euro-American imagination – are concerned about the well-being of their lands and worried about pollution, deforestation, or the depletion of natural resources on the reservation. Indeed, a cursory glance at a book published last year, *Native Americans and the Environment*, shows how high are the stakes in the debate over whether the ecological Indian is either a myth or a reality, or a bit of both. If on the one hand, as Darren Ranco writes in his contribution to the volume, “the complicated world of Indian ecological behavior defies the stereotype of the ecological Indian and dehumanizes Indians” (40), one must also never forget “the material and historical contexts” (47) within which Indians themselves (and not Whites) strategically resort to certain “invented” images and traditions. Simply put, the danger that the debunking of the image of the ecological Indian might quickly turn into an argument against Indian sovereignty is a real one – first you show that Indians may mismanage their lands and that they do not act the way “real” Indians are supposed to, and then, once you have proven that the ecological Indian does not exist, you can call into question the legal rights of tribes to control their lands.

Before I proceed to examine in greater detail the political implications of the image of the ecological Indian, I need to say a few words about the second

figure mentioned in my title, the exuberant, deeply ironic, at times controversial Sherman Alexie. Unlike many of his fellow Indian writers, in his poetry and fiction Alexie does not devote much space to openly ecological or ecocritical themes. Indeed, in a recent interview he has polemically stated: "I always sort of laugh when people talk about the 'environmental Indians.' You ever been to a rez? There's a whole lot of tin cans on the road" ("Sherman Alexie"). To Alexie the tragic realities of alcoholism, poverty, unemployment, violence and desperation to be found on many Indian reservations make any ritual invocation of the "magic" or intensely spiritual features of Indian philosophies and religions rather irritating. In particular, Alexie has spoken forcefully against a literary tradition – both White and Indian – glorifying what he describes as "stereotypical crap about being Indian" (Torrez). Regardless of whether certain lyrical passages may have been penned by White, Indian, or "wannabe" Indian authors, Alexie takes a strong polemical stance against what, with his characteristic mix of humor and bluntness, he identifies as "the four directions corn pollen mother earth father sky shit." Sherman Alexie is of course not the only Indian author to have protested the exploitation and dissemination of a Romanticized, idealized, often paternalistic image of the Indian: one need only think of similar stances taken by writers like Thomas King, Gerald Vizenor, and many others. More generally, I would say that any major Indian author has always had to fight against the "white man's Indian." By choosing Alexie as the ideal foil of "Chief Seattle," therefore, my intention is not so much to juxtapose two figures but two *attitudes*, two *approaches* which, however, cannot be easily reduced to the White versus the Indian view on the "ecological Indian." The story of Seattle's speech(es) may be to a large extent the story of how "non-Indians put words into Indians' mouths by appropriating Native imagery and identity for their own purposes," but it may also be seen as an illustration of "how Indians have tried to re-appropriate what whites had either invented or taken" (Center). It is surely no accident that in a book with a telling title – *The Earth's Mind* – and a preface by such an authority on things Indian as the late Vine Deloria, Jr., Robert Dunsmore assigns to Seattle's original text an important place in an American Indian literary and philosophical canon devoted to correcting our mistaken notion that "the earth does not have mind" (40). Moreover, Dunsmore insists throughout his book that what he considers the genuine philosophical core of

the speech – its insistence on the absence of fixed boundaries “between ourselves and others, and between inside and outside worlds” (49) – permeates many Indian texts old and new. In sum, while on the one hand many of us may share Alexie’s impatience regarding the stereotypically New Age “mother earth father sky shit” (“Torrez”) to which we have been treated by numerous literary and cinematic productions, on the other hand one must also acknowledge that if we were to dismiss *all talk* about four directions and corn pollen and mother earth as a form of spurious, ideologically suspect lyricism, many of the most celebrated American Indian authors, of both yesterday and today, would have to be severely criticized for endorsing some version of the “ecological Indian.”

A recent book by Joni Adamson, titled *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place*, offers an interesting and promising way out of this deadlock. Her starting point is somewhat different from mine, in that Adamson contrasts the attitudes towards the environment marking the majority of White “nature writing” – which she sees as committed to asserting “the greater significance of the green world over the world inhabited by humans” (15) – to a more flexible and complex American Indian “garden ethic” that “teaches us to live more responsibly in the specific places we inhabit, to acknowledge our embodiment in the natural world, to honor the wildness we find all around us” (68). Thus, in an interesting discussion of Simon Ortiz’s work, Adamson notes that “When most European Americans have wanted to think about their relation to nature, they, unlike the Acoma people, have not gone to the garden, that middle place between nature and culture, but to the wilderness, that place they imagine as untouched by human culture” (55). In my view Adamson’s study has at least two advantages. First, it convincingly shows that the ecological sensibility which may be found in American Indian thought, literature, and practice has nothing to do with the cliché of the Indian as a “child of nature.” She rightly insists that American Indians do not go to “nature” for survival, but to cultural traditions that inspire and instruct human beings to think “carefully and responsibly about the uses to which they put the land” (64). Secondly, Adamson also emphasizes the extent to which attitudes toward the environment cannot be separated from larger social, economic, and political questions. As the title of Ortiz’s book discussed by Adamson makes clear, to fight for the *land* means to fight for the *people*,

perhaps not because the two are exactly the same thing – as, in Dunsmore's view, Chief Seattle would have it – but because to “serve the land so that it is not wasted and destroyed” (360) as Ortiz writes, means to ensure the survival of both. Indians cannot survive without a proper use of their lands, and neither can their lands survive if the Indians, or the White powers always eager to do away with Indian sovereignty, misuse the land.²

Adamson's book may help us see the conflict between “Chief Seattle” and Sherman Alexie with new eyes. In some of the work discussed by Adamson, and in general in much of contemporary Indian literature, we may find numerous references to feathers, corn pollen, ceremonial sticks, and other symbols and paraphernalia of the “ecological Indian.” Yet I doubt that Alexie – who greatly admires, for example, writers such as Ortiz, Leslie Silko, and Joy Harjo – would dismiss these references as nothing but a load of bull. And while he would probably insist that the reader should never be allowed to forget the unpleasant realities of life “on the rez,” he himself has repeatedly underlined the healing and creative prerogatives of the “imagination”; “the imagination is the only weapon on the reservation” is one of the most quoted and discussed of Alexie's poetic formulations. The rituals and traditions described by Silko and Ortiz – think for example of the scene in Silko's *Ceremony* where Tayo sprinkles yellow pollen from his uncle Josiah's tobacco pouch over the footprints of the mountain lion that acts as his animal helper, or of the symbolic and poetic import of Indian corn in a poem like Ortiz's “To Change in a Good Way” – are another version of what Alexie calls “imagination”: a collective storehouse of myths and symbols shaping a “garden ethic” that has little to do with the “stereotypical crap about being Indian.”³ To be sure, Indians have no ecological DNA, yet there can be no question that they have an understandable interest in preserving the wellbeing of their lands along with that of the people who occupy them. As Adamson notes in her concluding remarks, “Rather than calling for the creation of literal gardens, the garden metaphor calls our attention to the world as a middle place, a contested terrain in which dispute arises from divergent cultural ideas on what nature is and should be, and on what the human role in nature is and should be” (183-84).

I think it is fitting that Adamson's book should close on such a conflictive and problematic note. Even though she tends to identify the Indian land ethic

as one calling for “more balanced and responsible uses of the world’s resources” (50), she also realizes that the environment is a *contested* terrain and that cultural ideas about how to relate to it are indeed *divergent*. Unfortunately, given that terms like “balanced” and “responsible” function within ecological debates much in the same way the word “peace” operates within discussions of war – so just as you have George Bush launching the air strikes against Afghanistan with the words “we’re a peaceful people,” you can rest assured that all mining operations on tribal lands are always conducted from a corporate viewpoint in “responsible” and “balanced” ways – *language itself* becomes a “contested terrain.” But things are much more complicated than a simple dispute over White versus Indian notions of “balance” and “responsibility.” Indian communities are themselves often split over what may be a proper and wise use of tribal lands and natural resources. My only hesitancy concerning Adamson’s intelligent and useful book is that she pays too little attention to how Indian views on the land diverge not only from dominant, market-oriented or corporate approaches, but also from the views of *other Indians as well*. America Indian communities are often divided in their feelings about the environment mainly because on many occasions it is actually quite hard to reconcile the wishes to defend both the wellbeing of the people and of the land. There is a telling moment in Adamson’s book, where she recounts how one of her Navajo students, in a paper she wrote for her class, emphasized that while “mainstream environmentalists might call for an immediate end to the mining operations and a cleanup of the sacred but now-scarred mesa [that is the Black Mesa uranium mine operated by the Peabody Corporation]” such a move would jeopardize the jobs on which her family, and many other Navajo families, depend for their survival. Indeed, the student whose paper left such an impression on Adamson was in college thanks to a scholarship from Peabody and she was studying to become an engineer. Her plan was to return one day to the reservation and work for the mining company with the intent to promote “more responsible and balanced uses” of the land. One must of course admire such youthful enthusiasm, yet I must confess that I am decidedly less hopeful than Adamson regarding the possibility of integrating “traditional Diné beliefs about human relation to the land” with a knowledge of Western engineering – at least as long as the Navajos will be dependent on corporate capital for their survival.

The historical record shows that American Indian communities very often split into opposing camps over the extent to which a Western technological “gardening” of their lands is compatible with traditional lifestyles and outlooks. To get a taste of how serious such internal divisions can be I would suggest reading a chapter tellingly titled “Chief Seattle’s Shadow” in Fergus Bordewich’s book, *Killing the White Man’s Indian*. Not only does the author report on a number of tribal controversies that have arisen in response to what he correctly identifies as “the imperatives of development”; Bordewich also shows that the need to develop independent sources of income often pits tribes “both against non-Indian neighbors and, in some places, against other, less well-endowed native communities.” Indeed, Bordewich mentions an incident in which the decision taken by the small community of Campos Indians in California to lease part of their reservation as a dumpsite to Mid-American Waste System was fiercely opposed by neighboring ranchers. And guess what one of these protesters decided to hang on the wall of her trailer? A decorated poster of Chief Seattle’s speech, as if to suggest that it was the White ranchers who were acting as “true” Indians, rather than the Campos themselves.

What strikes me about Bordewich’s chapter, however, is that in describing the case of the Campos Indians and similar cases involving the Paiutes of Nevada and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, in central Oregon – and consistent with the viewpoint expressed in his book’s title – he suggests that the notion of the “ecological Indian” is by and large a White invention that a responsible, mature, and truly modern Indian America should kill off once and for all. Thus in the early pages of his chapter Bordewich flatly declares that Chief Seattle’s speech “as it is known to most Americans is, quite simply, an invention,” which is certainly an exaggeration because, if we assume the earliest extant version of the speech to be authentic, later versions have certainly added much that wasn’t originally there, but they have also kept significant portions of the original text. At any rate, it is quite clear that Bordewich is uncomfortable with “Chief Seattle’s” idea that “the most truly ‘Indian’ relationship with the land is a kind of poetic passivity.” As the quotes used by Bordewich around the word “Indian” imply, he wishes that contemporary American Indians would do away with an ecological identity thrust upon them by White Romantics and their latter-day green followers.

Yet, in the final part of his discussion he takes a rather different perspective, writing that “it would be facile to dismiss Indian passion for the earth as a kind of exaggerated sentimentality” and acknowledging that “the resanctification of the earth has become for a great many Indians a medium of salvation that far outweighs its economic cost, a way to reconnect with the tribal past and with the lives of [the] ancestors” (160-161). Most surprisingly, in a chapter that opens declaring Seattle’s speech largely an “invention,” he concludes by quoting a rather poetic passage of Seattle’s text, albeit from the version that is considered today as the most philologically correct. In sum, Bordewich’s discussion of the “ecological Indian” problem is ultimately not so much a call to Indians to get rid of a largely invented tradition and get on with their lives as modern Indians in a capitalistic market-driven economy, as it might at first appear, but rather a way to acknowledge the “profound ambivalence” of contemporary Indian attitudes toward the environment. From the various Indians he has spoken to, Bordewich hears “the cacophony within the modern Indian psyche, where equally eloquent voices wrestle over the moral course of the tribal future, searching restlessly for a balance between the natural human craving for opportunity and affluence and the reluctance to disturb and disrupt” (160).

I said earlier that by juxtaposing Chief Seattle and Sherman Alexie my intention was to compare and contrast two different ways of thinking about the relationship between Indians and the environment. However, it should be clear by now that even that is too much of a simplification. Alexie’s impatience with “stereotypical” ecological “crap” should not be taken to mean that, in some hypothetical controversy over how to best use the Spokane tribe’s natural resources, he would side with the “modernizing” party. Alexie, too, is aware of how deeply ambivalent and contradictory are Indian feelings about the land and the need to make use of it commercially. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* he tells the story of how suddenly Thomas Builds-the-Fire “had just got a ton of money from Washington Water Power ... because they had to pay for the lease to have ten power poles running across some land that Thomas had inherited. When Indians make lots of money from corporations that way, we can all hear our ancestors laughing in the trees. But we can never tell whether they’re laughing at the Indians or the whites. I think they’re laughing at pretty much everybody” (12-13). So perhaps also Chief Seattle, the “real” one, is laughing pretty much at everybody: at the Indian and White

poets and writers who are inspired by "his" words, at the White ranchers who have made him their "anti-Indian" Indian hero, at the thousands of people around the world who ignore the complex textual history of his speech and take it as the final Indian word on ecological matters.

However, the fact that there is no conclusive, stable, unalterable "Indian" perspective on the vexed question of how to best make use of the environment in order to pull tribes out of conditions of endemic poverty (in this respect Indian nations are in a position similar to that of many so-called Third-World countries), is not the only "limit" that any ecocritical approach to American Indian literatures would have to take into account. As I suggested in reference to the inescapable vagueness of terms such as "balanced" or "responsible," while the "garden ethic" so eloquently described in Joni Adamson's book can have an important inspirational function, it remains – as Adamson herself admits – largely a "metaphor" for a "correct," more "just" approach to environmental issues whose practical contours and material content are hard to spell out and are likely to always remain hotly contested both within and outside American Indian communities. To put it a bit crudely, it seems to me that literature may have an important contribution in calling attention to the emotional, psychological, and social complexities involved in the exercise of Indian sovereignty – because that is what all politics of Indian land usage boil down to – but we can hardly hope for any literary text, no matter if ecologically or ecocritically conscious, to tell us in detail what may be an appropriately "balanced" exploitation of the natural and human resources available on the reservation. In this regard I am tempted to turn on its head a remark made by Ursula Heise in a review essay published last year in *Contemporary Literature*, where she notes that it remains unclear how "an improved ecological literacy might translate into issues of literary and cultural study" (295). As a student of contemporary American Indian literature I welcome the important work done by those critics who call attention to the ecological concerns of many Indian texts. Yet I also cannot help but wonder how exactly an improved awareness of the ecological dimension of American Indian literature and culture might translate into issues of environmental politics on the rez, and elsewhere. If, as Heise writes, "the question of the distinctive contribution that humanistic research grounded in ecology might make to cultural studies at large" (295) remains an open one, I would suggest also that the question of what may be the

distinctive contribution of an ecocritical Indian literature to the functioning of American Indian sovereignty remains unsettled. My impression is that such a contribution might turn out to be less crucial than many would wish. I have no doubt that the increased understanding of natural phenomena made possible by the *science* of ecology may have a significant contribution to make in shaping tribal decisions regarding the environment. As far as literature goes, however, it would be unrealistic to expect it to give detailed “ecological” instructions on the best use of Indian lands. From this point of view, all discussion of the ecological Indian both as myth and as reality will always take place in the shadow of Chief Seattle, which is not something to be worried about as long as we have writers like Sherman Alexie always ready to remind us that while at times the ancestors may indeed be gravely bemoaning the fate of their grandchildren, often they may also be laughing.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this essay was read at the conference on “*Ecocriticism – Retorica e Immaginario dell’Ambiente nel Canone Letterario Occidentale*” (Università “Sapienza,” Rome, June 26-27, 2007). I am grateful to Rosa Maria Colombo, Emilia Di Rocco, and Caterina Salabé for their invitation to participate. Many thanks to Masturah Alatas for her insightful editing of the essay.

² The title of Ortiz’s volume is *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, for the Sake of the Land* (1980), later included in Ortiz.

³ See Silko 196 and Ortiz 308-17.

Works cited

- Adamson, Joni. *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2001.
- Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Atlantic, 1993.
- Bordewich, Fergus M.. *Killing the White Man’s Indian: Reinventing American Indians at the End of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Random House, 1996.
- Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest, University of Washington. *Northwest Writing and Regional Identity. Part I: Texts By & About Natives*. <http://www.washington.edu/uwired/out-reach/cspn/Website/Hist%20n%20Lit/Part%20One/Natives%20Essay.html>.

- Dunsmore, Roger. *Earth's Mind: Essays in Native Literature*. Fwd. Vine Deloria, Jr. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1997.
- Heise, Ursula K. "Greening English: Recent Introductions to Ecocriticism." *Contemporary Literature* 47 (2006): 289-98.
- "Juliette Torrez Goes Long Distance with Sherman Alexie." *About.com:Poetry* http://poetry.about.com/library/weekly/aa083199.htm?once=true&COB=home&terms=alexie&PM=113_300_T.
- Kaiser, Rudolf. "Chief Seattle's Speech(es): American Origins and European Reception." *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*. Ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987. 497-536.
- Ortiz, Simon. *Woven Stone*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1992.
- Ranco, Darren J. "The Ecological Indian and the Politics of Representations." *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian*. Ed. Michael E. Harkin and David Rich Lewis. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2007. 32-51.
- "Sherman Alexie in Conversation with Williams Cole." *The Brooklyn Rail: Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics, and Culture*. <http://www.thebrooklynrail.org/books/winter03/shermanalexie.html>.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: Viking 1977.