

... I am a veteran of at least 30,000 years
when I travelled with the monumental yearning
of glaciers, relieving myself by them,
growing, my children seeking shelter
by the roots of pines and mountains.⁸

Like Momaday, Ortiz believed in the central importance of stories as a source of individual and corporate identity. In the preface to *A Good Journey* (1977), an anonymous voice asks the poet, "Why do you write?" The answer comes quickly: "The only way to continue is to tell a story . . . your children will not survive unless you tell something about them." Ortiz wrote poems to teach his children, Raho Nez and Rainy Dawn, about the values of their Pueblo ancestors. "Be patient, child, be kind and not bitter." Ortiz's own father had taught him the patience and attentiveness necessary for the building of stone walls and the carving of wood, virtues that still have the power to bind a people together.

*All these, working in the mind,
the vision of weaving things
inwardly and outwardly
to fit together, weaving stone
together, my father tells me
how walls are built.*

Raho Nez, he writes, will be "tasting forever" the ancient dust of the stones at Canyon de Chelly, where Native people have lived continuously for thousands of years. To his daughter Rainy Dawn he writes,

*relish
the good wheat bread your mother makes,
taking care that you should think
how her hands move, kneading the dough,
shaping it with her concern,
and how you were formed and grew in her.⁹*

Ortiz's *After and Before the Lightning* (1994) is a collection of verse written during a winter spent teaching at Sinte Gleska College on the

⁸Selected and excerpted lines are from poems in *Going for the Rain*, © 1976. Permission is granted by the author, Simon J. Ortiz.

⁹Selected and excerpted lines are from poems in *A Good Journey*, © 1977. Permission is granted by the author, Simon J. Ortiz.

Rosebud Sioux reservation in South Dakota. Ortiz experienced anew the sense of being adrift in a vast landscape (geographic and human), where meaning was elusive yet attainable. Caught in the bitter cold and driving snow of a prairie wind "feels like being somewhere between South Dakota and 'there,' perhaps at the farthest reaches of the galaxy." Through the act of writing, Ortiz was able to center himself and get his bearings. "I needed a map of where I was and what I was doing in the cosmos," he explained. "Writing this poetry reconnected me to the wonder and awe of life." Likewise for the reader, Ortiz's poems are a beacon of hope and a challenge for the future. *After and Before the Lightning*, in the judgment of Leslie Marmon Silko, is "a symphony of poems of celebration and prayers for survival in America's prairie winter of the soul."

Evidence that the teachings of poets like Simon J. Ortiz were hitting home was found in the writings of the latest generation of young Native American poets. Their search for an authentic identity led them also to rediscover the strengths of family and tradition. In 1986 a fifth-grade Crow student from Montana wrote a poem called "As I Dance" in which she describes her joy in wearing the traditional Crow regalia of feathers and elk teeth and dancing as her grandmother watches. Three years later a Navajo eighth-grader wrote about his renewed faith in the Great Spirit and his sense of fulfillment singing the traditional songs of his people. His poem "Going Up the Mountain" first appeared in the *Wingate Elementary School Poetry Calendar* (1989), part of a federally-sponsored writing project at his school in New Mexico. A San Carlos / Taos Pueblo eighth grader wrote a similar poem in 1990 paying tribute to the "Apache People and Their Heritage." Her poem, first published in an anthology of student verse, describes in lively detail the sights and sounds of a proud people trying to keep alive the ways of their ancestors. Likewise, a Native American tenth-grader wrote movingly about his rediscovery of the traditional culture of his people on the plains of southern Montana. In "Under One Sun," published in *A Tree Fall of Leaves Which Are Stars* (1990), this young poet awakens to a new understanding of the meaning of the drums he has heard beating at a powwow.

So it was that the literary renaissance that began with the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize to N. Scott Momaday in 1969 showed no sign of diminishing. The eternal search for identity, the unceasing reflection and questioning, continued among a new generation of young poets. Their writings, filled with vivid images of their heritage, bear eloquent

witness to the importance of their quest. In their poetry we hear what Carla Willetto, a Navajo student at the Rough Rock School in Arizona, has called “Rising Voices”:

*Rising from the monolithic monuments,
purple mountains and rolling grasslands,
The moaning winds carry a soft
but steadily rising voice . . .*

*A voice made of many voices
of proud men and women
with a hope and a question. . . .
Will we make it? . . . Listen!*

*The Voice—our Voice—is getting stronger
Rising to the turquoise sky—
Listen! You will hear it soon . . .
very soon. . . .*¹⁰

SOURCES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The Native American literary renaissance has been chronicled and analyzed by several scholars, and it is upon their work that this chapter is based. The single most important source for the first section of the chapter is Louis Owens’s brilliant analysis, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (1992). Of nearly equal importance are Charles R. Larson, *American Indian Fiction* (1978); Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* (1983); Gerald Vizenor, ed., *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literature* (1989); Alan R. Velie, *Four American Indian Literary Masters: N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor* (1982); and Alan R. Velie, ed., *American Indian Literature: An Anthology* (1991).

Leslie A. Fiedler, “The Indian in Literature in English,” in Wilcomb E. Washburn, ed., *History of Indian-White Relations*, vol. 8, *Handbook of North American Indians* (1988), provides a brief overview. See also Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat, eds., *Recovering the*

about the American Indian (1979); and Gerald Vizenor, ed., *Native American Literature: An Anthology* (1995).

The discussion of Native American short fiction is based on the introduction and selections in Craig Lesley, ed., *Talking Leaves: Contemporary Native American Short Stories* (1991), and Clifford E. Trafzer, ed., *Earth Song, Sky Spirit: Short Stories of the Contemporary Native American Experience* (1992). See also Greg Sarris, ed., *The Sound of Rattles and Clappers: A Collection of New California Indian Writing* (1994); Joseph Bruhac, ed., *Returning the Gift: Poetry and Prose from the First North American Native Writers Festival* (1994); and Elizabeth Woody, *Luminaries of the Humble* (1994).

The two main sources for the consideration of Indian poetry are Kenneth Lincoln’s *Native American Renaissance* and Alan R. Velie’s *American Indian Literature*. See also Joseph Bruhac, *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets* (1987). The selections from the next generation of Indian poets are taken from Arlene B. Hirschfelder and Beverly R. Singer, eds., *Rising Voices: Writings of Young Native Americans* (1992).