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The Native American Poetics of
Walt Whitman and
Pablo Neruda

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Introduction

Ancestor-Continents: American and *Americano*

The whole continent is
obsessed by the question:
what is it to be an American?

—*Octavio Paz*

Anthologies of North American poetry often begin on the sadly perfunctory note of including a selection of American Indian poems to preface a presentation of “the American tradition.” Seldom is any attempt made to relate these translations of native oral literature to the poetry that follows. Those few pages are intended to represent, in its entirety, a dark, unknowable *before*, the millennia of “primitive” prehistory preceding the advance of European “civilization.” In his popular anthology of the 1940s, Oscar Williams ventures further than most editors in explaining his introductory American Indian material: “I have included these translations because I am sure that the originals were important poetry and because it would be arrogant to call this book ‘American’ while omitting poetry that existed in America for long centuries before the short few hundred years of the white man’s occupation.” Williams insists, however, on the lack of any connection between native and later American forms, that “the peculiar handicap of American poetry has been that it has not had just this indigenous epic material as its foundation. Other major literatures can show organic growth from savage and barbaric folklore, warrior songs and ballads, common to a people long in their habitat.”¹ What North American poetry lacks, Williams implies, is an aboriginal *Beowulf* to serve as a bridge between

continental origins and the culture of European settlers, which is why anthologies such as his leap from the Cherokee to Anne Bradstreet in one disquieting page. This jarring jump prefigures another in North American poetry, the break between Walt Whitman and all North American poets who wrote before him. Certainly, the distance between Whitman's poetry and that of his predecessors and contemporaries is as great as the one between an American Indian incantation and the derivative iambs of colonial verse. These discontinuities, on the one hand, demonstrate the fragmentation of the North American poetic voice; yet, on the other hand, they point toward a uniquely American synthesis that occurs in the final pages of recent anthologies.

This curious synthesis is evident in the contributions of several contemporary poets who seem to represent a closing of this twice-broken circle. The influences of Whitman and of American Indian poetry seem to blend indetectably into each other, as if they sprang from an almost identical poetics. These three brief passages of contemporary North American poetry, for example, are from a non-Indian poet who has adopted an indigenous source of inspiration, a contemporary American Indian poet, and a disciple of Whitman:

I'm a holy clown woman
 I'm a whirling dervish woman
 I'm a whirling foam woman
 I'm a playful light woman
 I'm a tidal pool woman
 I'm a fast speaking woman²

I am a flame of four colors.
 I am a deer standing away in the dusk.
 I am a field of sumac and the pomme blanche.
 I am an angle of geese upon the winter sky.
 I am the hunger of the young wolf.
 I am the whole dream of these things.³

While the infinite epic of each second in infinity
 touched me—
 From the birth of the sun,

From the birth of the earth,
 From the birth of all life
 to the earliest men,
 From the discovery of fire,
 From the invention of tools. . . .⁴

The first excerpt is from Anne Waldman's *Fast Speaking Woman*, modeled after the chants of the Mazatec shaman Maria Sabina. The second is from *Angle of Geese and Other Poems* by the Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday, whose poetry follows traditional forms native to his people. The final passage, by a poet who calls himself Antler, is from "Factory," a poem that Allen Ginsberg has praised as "a definitely powerful epic by one of Whitman's 'poets and orators to come.'" One could profitably compare lines from *Leaves of Grass* to the poetry of any of these three poets, studying Whitman's poetics, as he intended, in the works of his successors. Yet the difficulty in deciphering which, in fact, proceeded from Whitman and which from his aboriginal predecessors indicates perhaps a common source or model shaped by the singular nature of the American experience itself.

The perspective given this national experience while living outside of it can be invaluable, and the way I chose to explain the uniqueness of Whitman to a group of European readers served as the genesis of this book. Not far from the plazas in Barcelona where conquistadors paraded their menageries of American exotica—wild parrots, alligator skins, native peoples—before the unbelieving eyes of sixteenth-century Catalans, I encountered a similar confused disbelief among their descendants when I assigned "Song of Myself" from *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* to an American literature class at the University of Central Florida. Before Whitman, the students' interest in North American poetry was less than enthusiastic, yet for those schooled in Wordsworth and Tennyson, at least nineteenth-century American poems sounded and functioned in a somewhat duller fashion as poetry in English should: metaphor, simile, scansion, rhyme scheme, irony, conceit, romanticism, and neoclassicism. Whitman's "barbaric yawp," on the other hand, constituted a genuinely foreign poetics for which these readers were unprepared. It was at this point that I first realized the significance of what at first seemed the unintegrated sampling of American

Indian poetry that introduces "the American tradition" in the *Norton Anthology*. We returned to the notes on repetition, apostrophe, parallel structure, compound elements, animism, tribalism, and shamanism that I had presented to explain the American Indian section, and used them to interpret the seemingly jumbled, egotistical redundancies of the Whitman poem. Compared to the British poetics with which the students were familiar, American Indian poetics provided a surprisingly accurate and useful map to the uncharted terrain of Whitman. As we continued in our reading of twentieth-century North American poetry, from Lindsay and Williams to Ginsberg and Snyder, the oral, tribal poetics of the American Indian, as filtered through a reading of Whitman, seemed to bear a much more definitive relevance to the American voice than any of the recognizably British elements. The two gaping discontinuities in anthologies of North American poetry seemed to coincide in the most unexpected manner: Whitman had not "invented" modern American poetry any more than Columbus had "discovered" the Americas. What was reinvented and rediscovered by Europeans was already here: "The friendly and flowing savage, who is he?" Whitman asks in "Song of Myself." "Is he waiting for civilization, or past it and mastering it?" (39:73).

Just as American Indian poetics served as a model for the poetry of Walt Whitman that baffled my Spanish students, Whitman's poetry has provided me with an approximate map for the equally mysterious mosaic of myths and chants in Pablo Neruda's *Canto general* (1950). Although *Canto general* did not appear in English translation until 1991, beginning in the 1960s Robert Bly had begun to convince North American readers that it "is the greatest long poem written on the American continent since *Leaves of Grass*. It is a geological, biological, and political history of South America. The book contains 340 poems arranged in fifteen sections. The fertility of imagination is astounding."⁵ Bly's comparison of Neruda's major book with *Leaves of Grass* is not only complimentary but demonstrates his understanding of the parallel nature of these two monumental American works, which seem to define not only the American experience, from north to south, but the American voice in poetry as well. *Canto general* is the most Whitmanesque work of a poet whom many acknowledge as Latin America's greatest, one whose prolific and influential voice, throughout the vari-

ous stages of its expression, is greatly indebted to *Leaves of Grass*. In James E. Miller's phrase, both books "create a myth for the mythless American,"⁶ and might be considered examples of what he calls the "personal epic." Yet if the epic as a European form must, as Miller explains, be thoroughly revised within the context of the American experience in order to maintain its relevance as a term, one hopes for a more native basis of comparison for the works of the two poets who defined that experience quite deliberately *against* European forms. In establishing a comparative basis for the two greatest nativist poets of the Americas, one could do worse, I am convinced, than to return to that native oral tradition routinely included as merely a preliminary to the poetic canon.

For various historical reasons, Latin Americans have always been considerably more conscious of the native origins of their culture and literature than North Americans. Those several pages dedicated to American Indian literature in North American literary histories are matched twentyfold by similar considerations in accounts of Latin American literary histories.⁷ The American Indian as a theme of Latin American writers is a subject perennially discussed, yet there have been few extended considerations of the American Indian poetics of a major Latin American poet. As the basis for a comparative study of Whitman and Neruda, the analogy of American Indian poetics provides a culturally relevant model that relates the North and Latin American experiences on a level most essentially common to them both. Chapters of this book focus on this model in regard to Whitman and Neruda's nativist perspectives and Indianist backgrounds, their oral poetics, shamanic personae, and, in the final chapter, their initiatory journeys in a comparative reading of "The Sleepers" and "Alturas de Macchu Picchu." I have resisted subjecting this uniquely American subject to the obfuscating orthodoxies of recent European theorists, whose terminology clanks like suits of armor to my ears, and so my approach has generated much of its own critical vocabulary. This eclectic perspective, based on borrowings from anthropology, ethnopoetics, linguistics, and comparative mythology, addresses the poetry of Whitman and Neruda in terms of the "maternal and paternal traditions," "illocution," "oral emphatics," "essential detail," "tribal grouping," the "shamanic voice," and the "vertical voyage,"—an interdisciplinary collage of terms adopted

to align the sprawling mosaics of the poets' works with the American Indian models they so closely resemble.

Such a consideration of Whitman is long overdue, and provides a necessary key for understanding the various gaps and convergences in the development of the North American poetic voice. Only one major study, George Hutchinson's book on Whitman and shamanism, has moved in the promising direction of relating the poet's persona to a tribal role, yet it hesitates to take the next step, linking this shamanism to Whitman's oral poetics or more specifically to American Indian culture. Several of Neruda's readers, on the other hand, such as Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Manuel Durán, have commented on the poet's pronounced Indianist sympathies as a dominant aspect of *Canto general*, yet without relating this theme to the poetics and persona at work in the book. No writer has previously attempted an extended comparison of these two American poets, although both Fernando Alegría and Rodríguez Monegal have contributed perceptive commentaries on this subject in the contexts of other works. In short, various signs point to the parallel nature of these three paths—of Whitman, of Neruda, and of American Indian poetics—and this book attempts to mark the crossroads where they have converged into the broader common road long identified as the American poetic voice.

This study represents both a geographically horizontal as well as an anthropologically vertical exploration of a poetics that has come to be known, appropriately, as nativist or Americanist. I shall attempt to establish that this poetics is, in several aspects, also Native Americanist; that like many other American arts, our poetry—or an important strain of it—has entered the Americas through the front door of their original cultures, and has therefore been able to make itself at home on these continents. This book coincides with a growing recognition of the “mixed” roots of the hemispheric character and of the overlooked contributions of the American Indian, and adds the American poetic voice to the long list of cultural expressions with uniquely indigenous features. The ambitious scope of such a triangular comparison by analogy has necessarily limited its completeness, and this book is intended as much to suggest a direction in inter-American and cross-cultural readings as to establish its own particular interpretations. In sympathy with its subject, this effort is offered as a healing of the differences that di-

vide us, already exaggerated by the obvious and unalterable contrasts imposed by history and geography. Looking toward the future, it is dedicated to breaking through certain partitions—often made only of Bible-tissue anthology pages—that separate the native, English- and Spanish-language poetic responses to the hemisphere.

What is this many-headed creature, American poetry? “Whatever it is,” Louis Simpson writes, “it must have / A stomach that can digest / Rubber, coal, uranium, moon, poems.”⁸ These digestive powers essential to the continuity of an American poetics are called for in Whitman's “programme of chants,” in which he first articulates, perhaps anticipating his own impact on Latin American poetry, the inclusive concept of “Americanos,” one triumphantly carried forth by Neruda in *Canto general* with his invocation to an “amor americano” atop the ruins of Macchu Picchu. In “Starting from Paumanok,” Whitman recognizes the magnetic unity and continuity that his poetry will represent for future generations of poets on these “ancestor-continents . . . north and south, with the isthmus between”:

Successions of men, Americanos, a hundred millions,
One generation playing its part and passing on,
Another generation playing its part and passing on in its turn,
With faces turn'd sideways or backward toward me to listen,
With eyes retrospective towards me.

(2:16–17)

II

Yet a fundamental question persists: American or *Americano*? One of the practical considerations involved in beginning a comparative study of this kind carries us directly to the heart of what this one is about: What do we, the peoples of the New World, call ourselves? The act of naming is essential to the poetry of both Whitman and Neruda. Each attempted to name into unity the physical, cultural, and spiritual qualities of their continents. Originally named by explorers, conquistadors, and mapmakers, the Americas were finally christened by their poetry. A pivotal section of Neruda's *Canto general* is titled “América, no invoco