Winter 1979

The Old Voices of Acoma: Simon Ortiz's Mythic Indigenism

Willard Gingerich
Montclair State University, gingerichw@montclair.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/english-facpubs

Part of the Indigenous Studies Commons, and the Other American Studies Commons

MSU Digital Commons Citation
Gingerich, Willard, "The Old Voices of Acoma: Simon Ortiz's Mythic Indigenism" (1979). Department of English Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works. 63.
https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/english-facpubs/63

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of English Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.
The Old Voices of Acoma: Simon Ortiz’s Mythic Indigenism

Author(s): WILLARD GINGERICH

Source: *Southwest Review*, WINTER 1979, Vol. 64, No. 1 (WINTER 1979), pp. 18-30

Published by: Southern Methodist University

The Old Voices of Acoma
Simon Ortiz’s Mythic Indigenism

WILLARD GINGERICH

Some seventy miles west of Albuquerque, south of the main highway into Gallup and Arizona, a small mesa rises three hundred feet or so in a vast landscape of low brown mountains, cliffs, and a shallow valley which rests green with centuries of nurture and carefully guarded fertility. On top of this mesa sit the irregular adobe houses of Acoma Pueblo, the Sky City, of a color with the cliffs below and invisible from a distance. This is the matrix of the Acoma people, first built, they say, sometime before history when Masaweh, one of the Divine Twins created by Earth herself, led the people up the cliffs. This is the context of Simon Ortiz’s origins, and his first complete poetry collection, Going for the Rain, No. 7 in Harper & Row’s Native American Publishing Program, is a vast extension, radical in its implications both socially and poetically of his knowledge of that precarious but infinitely secure American context.

The growth of writing out of indigenous sources among us shows signs of becoming our “Encyclopedia of Tlon,” that complete study of another reality which Borges, in his story “Tlon Uqbar,” describes slowly but inexorably dissolving the reality of common four-square occidental rationality. With this collection Ortiz shows himself one of the acutest edges of that indigenous penetration into the rotund body of Anglo-American reality, all the more acute for the apparent innocuousness, even transparency, of his voice. In a poem not in this book Ortiz describes how an Anglo couple fishing by a lake in Navajo country turn toward the narrator in alarm as their little dog bursts into frenzy, only to assure one another, “Oh, it’s only an Indian.” The opposite deception surfaces in “I Told You I Like Indians” when the narrator, driven to exasperation by the skin-level curiosity of the sight-seeing mentality (“You’re Indian aren’t you?”), defends himself with “Yeah, jesus christ
almighty, I'm one of them.” But Ortiz is not deceived or deterred by either of these illusions; he knows the spirit of the land moves, with increasing fluency, to a new dance, in which the old voices of Acoma are as natural as the lasers of Bell Systems Labs.

The question of indigenism in literature is one North American readers have not yet gotten clear. Latin America has, for the most part, long since addressed it seriously, and, in fact, made the debate a central factor of critical tradition. In 1927 César Vallejo, a Peruvian Inca by birth and one of the most outstanding poetic consciences of America in the first half of this century, wrote in defense of Rubén Darío, a Chorotega Indian of Nicaragua who spent much of his career in Paris. Darío’s brilliant musical grace and playful joy in language initiated a poetic revolution in the Spanish language known as Modernism, but in the twenties he came under increasing attack by American critics whose patriotism overawed their poetic sensibilities. Under the influence of the French Parnassians, Darío’s work had concentrated on an imagery of swans, fountains, princesses, and Paris, and the critics were censuring his lack of “American sensibility.” Vallejo responded:

Indigenization is an act of indigenous sensibility and not of indigenist will. A truly indigenist work is an innocent and fatal act of an artistic and political creator, and not a malicious, conventional, and expedient act by an anybody. Want it or not, one is or is not indigenist, and all for nothing are the calls, proclamations, and the admonitions for or against these forms of labor.

Being an “Indian,” in other words, does not necessarily make a writer indigenist, at least in the political sense of the word—or, for that matter, a poet. The question will not resolve on those impressionistic levels of race, landscape, and politics; the sensibility of the man himself in his language must answer for it all. On any street in the Southwest, either Darío or Vallejo would have passed as “just an Indian,” yet each has had a part in directing the destiny of poetic tradition in Spanish. Darío did eventually return to America to contemplate the infinite verdure of the Nicaraguan jungle, and Vallejo wrote always out of an indigenist Peruvian suffering that he translated to a human paradigm, and died in Paris of starvation, a radical but disillusioned Marxist.

The “American sensibility” is not a commodity bought and sold like turquoise but an awareness of life and geography that finds outlet in voices as diverse as Henry James and Stick Dice Gambler, legendary
practitioner of the Navajo Blessingway Chant. An Indian writer has no franchise on such consciousness, nor has he any guarantee of being more apt at its expression; it is a tradition like any other but more elusive and ill-defined than most, acquired like any other, in Eliot’s painful terms, “at great labor,” by Anglo, Black, Chicano, and Indian alike. If the Indian, Black, or Chicano writer has any advantage in the struggle to achieve such sensibility, it is in that his labor is greater, though not necessarily as painful, as the labor of an Anglo-American writer. This is the source of such vitality as now grows out of the “minority” literatures in vogue: not that these authors are poor, or sons of depressed and oppressed parents, or speak Spanish, or ride buses, or have no air conditioning, but that the felt distance they travel to arrive at full sensibility of themselves and their contexts is greater and generates therefore a finer tension of meaning, phrase, and allusion in their writing. Their active literary traditions, simply put, are not less but greater, and it is always the bearer of greatest tradition who eventually directs the central flow of literature in his culture.

The weight of tradition which sustains Ortiz through the poems of Going for the Rain is truly glacial. Moreover, the book is indigenist in Vallejo’s terms, a work of both artistic and political inevitability and innocence—not folkloric innocence, but clairvoyant sophistication that sees the continual rebirth of spirit in all materialism. It is a diverse collection, the work of years whose unity Ortiz has called together according to the ancient formula of Pueblo rain ritual: Preparation; Leaving; Returning; The Rain Falls. This structure is also the sacred enactment of the quincunx, touching the four directions and centered about the self. As Ortiz explains in the Prologue, there is a song which says,

Let us make our prayer songs.
We will go now. Now we are going.
We will bring back the shiwana.
They are coming now. Now, they are coming.
It is flowing. The plants are growing.

The reference to the shiwana is one of the very few specific uses of Pueblo mythology Ortiz makes in the entire ninety poems, and this song tells us all we need to know about them. The shiwana are kachina spirits who are or control the rain and all its spiritual meaning. They live somewhere west of Acoma in the mountains and inhabit rain clouds. One
assumes them as one assumes the Los Alamos atomic testing grounds
to the northeast.

Ortiz explicates the form this ritual supplies in the book and the life
of his narrator:

A man makes his prayers; he sings his songs. He considers all that is im-
portant to him, his home, children, his language, and self that he is. . . .

A man leaves; he encounters all manner of things. . . . His traveling is a
prayer as well, and he must keep on.

A man returns, and even the returning has moments of despair and tragedy.
But there is beauty and there is joy. At times he is confused, and at times he
sees with utter clarity. It is all part of the traveling which is a prayer.

It is, on its indigenous side, a tradition in which prayer survives, with
innocence and fatality:

I am an expectant father.

Pray then:

smile for all good things
note the wind,
note the rain,
touch the gentleness with care;
be good.

And with equal fatality has learned to curse:

I HAVE DRUNK AND TRIED TO KILL
MY ANGER IN YOUR GODDAMNED TOWN
AND I'M AFRAID FOR YOU AND ME
WHEN I WILL COME BACK AGAIN.

This is the title of a short verse in which the narrator replies to the
"opaque remorseful eyes" of a Gallup alcoholic,

Be kind, sister, be kind;
it shall come cleansing again.
It shall rain and your eyes
will shine and look so deeply
into me into me into me into me.
The voices of Ortiz's indigenism are diverse, and they begin with Coyote, the ubiquitous storyteller, at creation itself. "'First of all, it's all true,'" he assures us, and at once we are on guard, aware we are on a voyage of playful irony where wit and laughter will be our only defenses.

. . . Coyote told me this, and he was b.s.-ing probably.

. . . . . . . . . . . .

My uncle told me all this, that time. Coyote told me too, but you know how he is, always talking to the gods, the mountain, the stone all around. And you know, I believe him.

The quality of that belief in Coyote's voice(s) is a current that rises and falls through the collection, through scenes as diverse as Pacific beaches, Florida bars, Kennedy airport, and of course the Pueblo and Navajo Nations, where moments of diaphanous beauty occur. Nor is Coyote any respector of persons. In a Las Vegas bar the narrator hears,

"I told her, 'Shit, if you want a room to yourself, why baby that's alright, have it.' I had brought her up there on a four-million-dollar airplane, and I told her, 'You can go across the street and take a thirty-thousand-dollar bus back to Burbank.'"

That was Coyote talking.

In another time, as a boy following Coyote's tracks along the stream near Acoma, the narrator tells how he was startled by the blast of a shotgun, and suddenly Coyote was in him. "The animal in me crouches, poised immobile, eyes trained on the distance." This instinctual response to visceral fear left the knowledge that

Coyote's preference is for silence broken only by the subtle wind, uncanny bird sounds, saltcedar scraping,
and the desire to let that man free,
to listen for the motion of sound.

It is in that desire "to listen for the motion of sound" that Ortiz's indigenism passes over into the broader dimensions of his tradition, into that language common to a whole American sensibility. These are listening and speaking poems, and the grace of interplay in voices is such that one can say poetry occurs, and its occurrence is often the leap between mythic being and casual conversation with a child's easy complexity:

Yesterday, as I was lighting a cigarette,
Raho warned me with,
"If anyone starts a fire,
Smokey the Bear will come put them out."
Bear's got a lot of friends.

Listening for "the motion of sound" gives Ortiz a true mythic attention to objects, an attention of the sort W. S. Merwin does not achieve in spite of his assertions in "Mythic Thinking." In a prose meditation appended to a poem called "Buzzard" Ortiz touches the current of mythic thinking that reaches back to the poet-creators of Pueblo religion, and is, at once, a comment on that thinking.

I've heard an older man say, "They take the eyes first." I wonder why? I think it must have to do with ritual, some distinct memory consistent with the history of its preceding generations. And the buzzard pays ritual homage to the memory of its line, the tradition that insures that things will continue. Yes, that must be what it is. Eyes have a quality of regenerating visions which must continue first and last of all.

This is a truly ancient American voice, that acute natural observation combined with profound anthropomorphic awareness which characterizes the best of native North American myth, yet cast in English rhythms with the authentic contemporary of Robert Creeley. This is mythic thinking profoundly indigenous, but accessible in its implications to us all.

The measure of any poet's voice must finally rest in the quality of the tension he sustains between the widest common speech of his time and the pure rhythms of human sound he is able to extract from that speech. It is an ideal rather more complex than Eliot's "common speech of culti-
vated men”; more to the point is Zukofsky’s eminently useful definition of poetry as a mathematical integral between the two infinite terms, common speech and music, never resting in the former but never purely achieving the latter. My quotations have already demonstrated the direct feeding of speech into Ortiz’s verse, immediately obvious in the most casual reading; but has he found in that speech a music of sufficient grace and subtlety to mark it off as poetry? There is a markedly smooth and readable surface quality to Ortiz’s work which might be misread at first as prosaic and not, as I believe it is, a remarkable transparency of language whose range and freshness is worth serious attention, combining the irony of Coyote with the conversational rhythms of Ezra Pound.

There are first the language and tones of his own background. “I try to listen to the voices of the people back home,” Ortiz has said, “and use their sounds to direct my composition.” These voices are a new rhythm for English poetry, and “a new rhythm is a new idea.” There is first his father; “His voice, the slight catch/the depth from his thin chest.” And there is the private song of that voice, recalling the father’s father, and by implication the infinity of fathers before, always held just that one generation away.

“I remember the very softness of cool and warm sand and tiny alive mice and my father saying things.”

The father who says the things of a thousand generations, things accessible only through that voice. We touch here the sacred core of what oral tradition means to those who carry it, not only in the grand affairs of religion and culture, but in the small, everyday acts of family life. Some degree of the conviction in Ortiz’s rhythms must surely come from this glacial memory of voices that is oral tradition. Its depth is almost incomprehensible, yet its voice is always near, its tone continuous in the poet’s memory, and its artistic implications complex.

“Are you really a poet?”
“Shore.”
Crickets always talk like that.
A couple of nights after,
I listened for a long time
to a couple reminding themselves
about 10 million years ago
in some cave in Asia.
It was a long, long time ago.
They rattled membranes together
and sang all night long.

"I didn't know you were a poet."

Later on,
there was another cave.
A woman was moaning,
and later she was laughing,
not very far from a glacier's edge.

The voice of the glacier itself is there, in living memory:

Laguna man said,
I only heard that glacier scraping
once, thirty thousand years ago.
My daughter was born then.

Then there is the voice of singing, apt to break in at any moment.

In five more days
they will come,
singing, dancing,
bringing gifts,
the stones with voices,
the plants with bells.
They will come.

And there is a further, private voice, not singing, but prepared and directed by the songs.

I want you to see a pass
in the Chuska Mountains
where there are aspen, oak,
elevation high enough
for fir and snow
enough to last till June.
I've been up there twice,
once on a hard winter day.
The diversity of these rhythms, easy and accessible in their attachment to contemporary American English as it plays in our mouths and yet arranged with the smooth grace of endurance in the play of syllable against syllable and image against image, argues a poetic range of major proportion. It is linguistic intelligence and sensitivity that makes a poet, nothing more or less, and Ortiz demonstrates such sensitivity with a force that is seductive and compelling. Just how compelling became apparent to me in comparing two of his pieces with two poems by Frost. "How Close" brought to mind Frost's "For Once, Then, Something."

I wonder if I have ever come close, to seeing the first seed, the origin, and where?
I've thought about it, says Coyote.
Once I thought I saw it in the glint of a mica stratum a hairwidth deep.
I was a child then, cradled in my mother's arm.
We were digging for the gray clay to make pottery with.
That was south of Acoma years back; that was the closest I've gotten yet.
I've thought about it, says Coyote.

The rhythms here are not as complex as Frost's, but word for word it carries more variation, more music. And Coyote, whose intricacy I have hinted at, adds a dimension to the narrative self totally inaccessible to Frost. The "mica stratum," in context with the mother, her pottery clay, and Coyote's curiosity, is an image at least as intellectually muscular as Frost's "a something white, uncertain" in its context of poetic mimesis and spiritual typology in nature—or lack of it.

More impressive is the reflection of "A Story of How a Wall Stands" against Frost's "Mending Wall."

At Acu, there is a wall
Almost 400 years old
which supports hundreds
of tons of dirt and bones—
it's a graveyard built on a
steep incline—and it looks
like it’s about to fall down
the incline but will not for
a long time.

My father, who works with stone,
says, "That’s just the part you see,
the stones which seem to be
just packed in on the outside."
and with his hands puts the stone and mud
in place. "Underneath
what looks like loose stone,
there is stone woven together."
He ties one hand over the other,
fitting like the bones of his hands
and fingers. "That’s what is
holding it together."

"It is built that carefully,"
he says, "the mud mixed
to a certain texture," patiently
"with the fingers," worked
in the palm of his hand. "So that
placed between the stones, they hold
together for a long, long time."

He tells me those things,
the story of them worked
with his fingers, in the palm
of his hands, working the stone
and the mud until they become
the wall that stands a long, long time.

Here, in a shorter space, I find both rhythm and thought equal to Frost
in subtlety and suggestiveness, though more limited in music for the
lesser word-notes to play on. In comparison with Ortiz’s power of allu-
sion within succinct statement and observation, his refusal to moralize,
Frost’s first lines—

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That spends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
and spills the upper boulders in the sun;

—almost seem padded and rhetorical. The interwovenness of bones,
stone, and mud in Ortiz's wall is a complex image of foundations, implying a specific vision of human society, and with political overtones as clear as those in Frost's unnecessary wall.

Though consistently refusing to moralize over or around his images, Ortiz permeates the image itself with moral sense, with a social vision that touches even the most personal functions and experiences. The ritual format of the book itself—going out and returning—is an image of action taken not for personal aggrandizement but for benefit of the community. It is an anthropological cliché that Pueblo culture encourages the suppression of individualism to the prior demands of communal life; Ortiz has not suppressed but expanded his concern for community to us all. His theme is survival.

Yuma is a small town.  
It abounds with modern Americana, motels, gas stations, schools, churches, and etc. Where did they all come from?  
Do they really plan for survival this way?

Neon is weak.  
Concrete will soon return to desert.

While he is often preoccupied with the continuity of Indian culture, "how we have been able/ to survive insignificance," Ortiz is too astute not to see the intimate interconnections between Indian survival and the sickness in the larger American community. His politics are as radical as they are simple and direct:

I was on that freeway to Atlanta  
when I heard about the killings at Kent State.  
I pulled off the road just past a sign which read  
NO STOPPING EXCEPT IN CASE OF EMERGENCY  
and hugged a tree.

The concern translates often to attention for children, and there are many passages addressed to them with proportionate simplicity, sometimes as straightforward poetry of statement, extracting essential wisdom from the complex problems of survival.

28 winter 1979
You see, son, the eagle is a whole person
the way it lives; it means it has to do
with paying attention to where it is,
nor the center of the earth especially
but part of it, one part among all parts,
and that's only the beginning.

At his most lucid points this moral vision blends into the poetics and
even the physical sight of the narrator. Pound once said we all live in
certain landscapes, and through the movement of the eye rhythms are
imparted to or through the physical movement of the body. In a passage
which is key to his entire collection, and unique, I believe, in contempo-
rary writing for its combination of clear expression, unifying vision, and
vital utility, Ortiz develops the full implications of that idea.

On Friday, Joy and I talked
about sense of presence.
What is it? How does it come about?
I think it has to do
with a sense of worth, dignity,
and how you fit with occasion, place,
people, and time.
It's also a physical thing,
carriage of body,
hand and head movements,
eyes fixed upon specific points.
And then it is an ability
which is instinctive and spiritual
to convey what you see
to those around you.
Essentially, it is how you fit
into that space which is yourself,
how well and appropriately.

I can find little in current writing that offers me, personally and poeti-
cally, as much.

Ortiz is an "Indian" poet as Gerard Manley Hopkins is "Catholic."
The values they embody and pursue move with the spirit of the language
itself, and are at once beyond and inseparable from the images in which
those values are given life. I too, with Ortiz, believe Coyote, as with Hop-
kins I believe Duns Scotus.
There is a ceremony of initiation for village leaders at Acoma in which the initiates go to distant springs in the four directions, leaving prayer sticks at each spring and bringing water back from each to the pueblo. With this book Ortiz performs such an investiture, becoming "War Chief" (as these leaders were called) of a larger Acoma. He will not, I think, succumb to the commercial pressures the "ethnic" industry will bring upon him. The political pressures are more subtle and perhaps pressing. The most flawed poem I find in this collection, one called "Relocation," is an attempt to speak the bitterness of Any Lost Indian in the urban wilderness, but goes empty for lack of an emphatic and specific image. Occasionally other lines suffer the same disjunction between political and poetic obligations, apparently written in the pressure of those moments when the sense of an entire culture's suffering is intense but before its image comes clear. "Relocation" is canceled out, however, by "Blues Song for the Phoenix Bus Depot Derelict"; the image is luminous, the voice is clear.

Nor will Ortiz go academic; his simplicity is already too profound to fall prey to illusory complexities. Telling how he camped one cold night by the road in the Navajo Nation, he brings all those complexities down to one sustaining point, one desire:

In the morning,
I woke up to find
a puppy, you, yapping
like the original life,
a whole mystery crying
for sustenance.

We prayed.

What I want is a full life
for my son,
for myself,
for my Mother,
the Earth.

NOTE: Since this article was written, Ortiz has published another poetry collection, *A Good Journey*; a small book of stories, *Howbah Indians*; and an essay on *Song, Poetry and Language: Expression and Perception*, issued by Navajo Community College. The essay provides some interesting comments on the function of oral poetics, as Ortiz came to know it around the language of his father, in his written work. *A Good Journey* confirms the indigenism I have described in *Going for the Rain.*