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J O H N N E W T O N

Native Americanist Abroad: Exporting Blood Metaphysics Down Under

Chadwick Allen, *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts*. New Americanists ser. Durham, North Carolina, and London: Duke University Press, 2002. x + 308 pp. \$19.95 paper.

For the *Pakeha* (New Zealand non-Maori) critic, Chadwick Allen's *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* recalls us to a familiar but still perplexing situation, namely our own reluctance over the last twenty years or so to take up the analysis of Maori writing among ourselves. Not since Peter Beatson in *The Healing Tongue* (1989) has any local critic offered a book-length contribution to the field, while substantial essays and articles have been almost equally scarce. The pressures determining this situation may derive to some extent from the career politics of academic publishing: the pursuit of publication in prestigious journals and with international university presses has probably helped to steer my own self-consciously professionalized generation toward the more accommodating global outlets for theory, cultural studies, and the governing idioms of neocanonical revisionism. More than this, however, the pressures are indigen-
ous. Since the mid-1980s in particular (as Michael King, for example, attests) a hardening of Maori attitudes toward Pakeha commentary on Maori materials has placed a powerful disincen-
tive in the path of Pakeha liberals, however sympathetic their

intentions toward Maori writing.¹ It may be that a change in this situation is not far off. For the moment, however, Northern Hemisphere critics are the only non-Maori raising their voices, Allen's book being the most notable foray into the area since the Swiss scholar Otto Heim's monograph, *Writing along Broken Lines* (1998).

Americans, it has to be said, have often seen New Zealand clearly, and Allen, if he wished, could cite an imposing American *whakapapa* (genealogy). From Mark Twain in *Following the Equator* (1897), excoriating the colonial administration for erecting a *kupapa* monument at Pakaitore, to David Ausubel puncturing the complacent myth of New Zealand's race relations in *The Fern and the Tiki* (1960), to Karen Sinclair's exemplary ethnography of the Maramatanga movement in *Prophetic Histories* (2002), American writers and scholars have focused an outsider's viewpoint on Maori-Pakeha relations to salutary effect.² Steven Webster, a thirty-year resident, nonetheless still calls on his "professional outsider" status with challenging results in the essays collected as *Patrons of Maori Culture* (1998), while Allan Hanson's "The Making of the Maori" (1989), though received with some hostility, has proved a valuable conversation piece.³ This scholarly history bodes favorably enough, then, for Allen's comparative study of Native American writing alongside Maori. I am not convinced, however, that this promise is borne out, or that the book's potential strengths in terms of comparativism, detachment, and North American professionalism compensate for a shortfall in attention to local particulars.

To the question of why compare Native American and Maori writing, Allen responds initially with the potential for a mutual interillumination: "The first answer is that the comparison sets each group's discursive practices in relief, suggesting avenues for

1. Michael King, *Being Pakeha: An Encounter with New Zealand and the Maori Renaissance* (1985; Auckland: Hodder, 1988) 174–92.

2. Kupapa were Maori troops who fought on the side of the settlers in the New Zealand Wars. To this day, Pakaitore (also known contentiously as Moutoa Gardens, after the site of a well-known kupapa engagement) remains a key focus of protest activity.

3. Steven Webster, *Patrons of Maori Culture: Power, Theory and Ideology in the Maori Renaissance* (Dunedin: U of Otago P, 1998) 10.

analysis and theory that are less obvious when texts produced by either group are considered on their own" (2). Similarities and differences in the two groups' experiences of colonization—among the similarities, dramatic initial population decline, land wars and land confiscations, and a belated population recovery after World War II helping to lead in each case to a "renaissance" in the 1970s and since; among the differences, the fact that Maori are (in relative national terms) a larger population, the stronger presence of Maori in national politics and dominant discourses, and the quite different treaty histories of the two settler colonies—are cited as underlining the potential for a mutually productive comparative analysis. Beyond this, however, the project appears to shift ground, in a way that raises doubts about the potential payoff for Maori. Thus Allen remarks that such a comparison "also highlights the often hidden context of colonialism that is still operative within the United States" (4), drawing the United States into the context of the "settler colonies" and "refocus[ing] critical attention on American Indians as both colonized and indigenous" (5). Clearly this sounds like a positive outcome from a North American point of view. But it also sounds suspiciously like one-way traffic in the service of metropolitan discourse, and in this sense the work is not invulnerable to charges of unwitting neocolonialism.

These misgivings are brought into focus by Allen's introduction of his primary analytic lever:

What I call the blood/land/memory complex is an expansion of [N. Scott] Momaday's controversial trope blood memory. . . . Like Momaday's trope, the blood/land/memory complex articulates acts of indigenous minority recuperation that attempt to seize control of the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of indigenous "blood," "land," and "memory" and that seek to liberate indigenous minority identities from definitions of authenticity imposed by dominant settler cultures. . . . Although other scholars have used these individual terms or their cognates to examine the construction of Native identity in American Indian texts, typically they have focused on one and excluded the others. I argue that these terms and their potential meanings must be examined together, as a complex set of interactions, so that we can better understand the ways Maori and American Indian writers and activists both juxtapose

and integrate “real” and “imagined” genealogies, physical and metaphorical ancestral land bases, and narratives of “real” and “invented” histories in their constructions of viable contemporary indigenous identities.

(16)

The productive life that Momaday’s trope has enjoyed, and the quite persuasive way that Allen unpacks its implications in a Native American literary context, suggests that, at least in this American setting, there is a fruitful project to be built from its elaboration and critique. But what is not apparent—and the sudden appearance of Maori in the final sentence of this passage only highlights the issue—is why this explicitly Native American “complex” should need Maori writing to help in its unloading, or why Maori writing for its part should need this specific cluster of terms unloaded upon it. In terms of the discourse on Maori literature, Allen’s book performs a number of useful services: it focuses attention on the important role of World War II in the rejuvenation of Maori culture; it offers the most substantial account to date of the key government journal *Te Ao Hou*; and it effectively challenges the popular assumption that the writing *Te Ao Hou* published was inevitably or straightforwardly assimilationist. In a Native American context, I suspect its contribution may prove stronger again, and that Allen’s investigation of the rhetoric of “blood” may develop further in his subsequent work. But I am not convinced that Maori writing either enhances his exposition of this “blood/land/memory complex” or is particularly elucidated by it. On the contrary, I would suggest that the book’s importation into the reading of Maori texts of a Native American “blood” metaphysics only obscures those specific differences which it sets out to mobilize in its analysis.

For the writers of the Indian renaissance, the deployment of blood seems inevitably to carry echoes of the dominant discourse’s use of the blood quantum. Strategically reappropriated, this racialist master trope becomes “a catalyst for the recuperation of an integrated and successful contemporary American Indian identity” (178)—hence, of course, its headline billing in the title, where blood serves as metonym for that intricate (three-term) “complex.” To what extent blood as privileged figure of biological descent is anticipated already in autochthonous discourses is not a question Allen

ventures into. But his thoughtful account of Momaday—for whom, as Allen puts it, blood memory “tropes the conflating of storytelling, imagination, memory, and genealogy into the representation of a single, multifaceted moment in a particular landscape” (181)—and his subsequent tracking of Momaday’s trope as it echoes through the work of James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo, and, more ambivalently, Gerald Vizenor makes convincingly clear how pervasive it is, and how powerfully it serves these writers in their figuring of indigenous identities.

In Maori writing, however, the situation is quite different. Let me offer a fragment of what someone once called “low-budget ethnography”: in three years of learning the Maori language in undergraduate classes, I have never yet come across the Maori noun *toto* (blood); to judge from the kinds of text one encounters as a beginner (traditional stories, *whaikorero* [formal oratory], whakapapa, everyday conversations, political writing, grammatical examples, and vocabulary lists), blood is simply not a concept one needs. Thus as far as I am aware—and *Blood Narrative* makes no explicit case to the contrary—a metaphysics of blood is simply not a significant factor, either in traditional Maori culture or in postcontact Maori writing. On Day One, however, one encounters the word *iwi*, the noun which means “tribe” but which also means “bone(s)” in a conjunction familiar from Keri Hulme’s famous title, *The Bone People*. In other words, yes, there may be an approximately cognate term that figures a biological descent for which the default name in English is “blood.” But the term’s specificity has its own implications, and these are lost entirely if we assume that all figures of biological descent are more or less equivalent. The quantification of indigenous blood has never been the factor in New Zealand that it has in the United States. In blood terms, the question of who can call themselves Maori resolves into a kind of elective one-drop principle: to call yourself Maori, you need to have a Maori ancestor. This in itself, though, is not the entire picture, for to speak as a Maori you need not merely to descend from a Maori ancestor, but to be able to whakapapa to that ancestor. The issue, then, is as much one of language as of biological parentage. It is whakapapa—the ritual performance of genealogy—that enables the subject to speak as a member of the *iwi*.

Among the most successful moments in Allen's analysis of Maori texts is his detailed reading of a 1962 dual-language story by Hirini Moko Mead, "Show Us the Way/*Whakaaturia Mai Te Huarahi*." The text's publication in Maori and English versions underscores the complexly dialogic qualities of the story itself—a conversation between a Maori and a Pakeha undercut by the Maori protagonist's dissenting interior monologue. Reading the two versions, not as dual-language equivalents but rather as "metonymic of linguistic and cultural difference" (60), Allen is able to tease out an unstable intertext, the source of whose cultural potency is its resonance with the fraught translation politics of *Aotearoa*/New Zealand's founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi. It is a powerful exposition, and a significant act of archival recovery. But the further it goes, the more it reminds us that language itself—*te Reo Maori*—is not granted nearly enough prominence in Allen's account of the Maori renaissance. That Maori (with minor dialectical variations) spoke and speak a single language; that a written form arose and prospered in the immediate aftermath of colonization; that government education policy effectively strove, but failed, to eradicate the Maori language in the mid-twentieth century; and that a resurgence in the Maori language has underpinned the resurgence of the Maori renaissance itself—these factors in combination make the story of *te Reo Maori* into a metanarrative of Maori cultural regeneration and point to a fundamental difference in the cultural politics of decolonization as that struggle has been waged in *Aotearoa* and North America. Where cultural memory is not retained and nurtured through the transmission of a living language, then Momaday's adducing of "memory in the blood" has strategic appeal. But to transfer to *Aotearoa* a model in which blood displaces the cultural work of language puts an altogether misleading spin on Maori writing and activism.

In spite of the emphasis it receives in the subtitle, "activist" is not a strong term in *Blood Narrative*. Audiences in both hemispheres will welcome the book's attention to earlier texts than those that have generated most critical activity, with the first half of the book addressing the postwar "proto-renaissance" phase in each location: in *Aotearoa*, *Te Ao Hou*; in the United States, the work of Ruth Muskrat Bronson, Ella Cara Deloria, D'Arcy McNickle, and John

Joseph Matthews, buttressed at one end by *Indians in the War* (1945) and at the other by the *Declaration of Indian Purpose* of the 1961 American Indian Chicago Conference. They will also appreciate its willingness to move beyond avowedly “literary” texts and take up “the more difficult task of analyzing a much larger body of nonfiction and mixed-genre texts, whose oppositional strategies may be less subtle but also less easily recognized by scholars working exclusively with the analytical frameworks provided by orthodox postcolonial theory” (34). But analyzing such texts, not just as writing but as *activist* writing, is easier said than done; and for a “project in comparative literary and cultural studies” (2), as Allen describes his own work, the book is rather thin when it comes to addressing material contexts of production and, particularly, reception. Throughout the work, the “activist” function of texts refers purely to the “readings” they make available. Actual readers never appear—this despite the obligatory gestures toward “narrative tactics . . . that enable disenfranchised peoples like indigenous minorities to realize practical kinds of power including the power to make their voices heard by multiple audiences” (2). This failure is nothing new, of course, but it does undermine the more radical ambitions of what is really in the end a work of formalist literary studies, which reads all the texts within its purview as “literature.”

I am aware that this ungenerous review may smack of a kind of protectionism—ironically enough, when Pakeha critics have been so reluctant to do any of this work. I hope this book finds more receptive readers in North America. And it may turn out that its comparativism moves the discussion forward in New Zealand as well. Allen’s initial wager, after all, is that the comparison can set each of the two literatures in relief and highlight the necessary avenues of investigation. Perhaps, then, the doubts I have articulated here anticipate work that can now be done better and more urgently with *Blood Narrative* as a stimulus. The author will long have foreseen, I am sure, that the politics of cultural neo-imperialism predispose an audience “down under” to approach his comparative model with caution. But if his book helps engender a bolder discussion of Maori writing among New Zealand critics, then we may yet be grateful for the risks that he has been prepared to take in it.

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