

## (13) Cultural Pluralism in American Literature

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### Multiculturalism and Pluralism

Concept  
Develop-  
ments

- multiculturalism observes that there exist many different cultures but does not describe their mutual interaction
- pluralism suggests that every culture is influenced by every other, there is one native culture and others added
- multiculturalism and pluralism both promote the existence of multiple ethnic cultures within one larger culture
- at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century there were attempts to create **national American** literature independent from the European tradition, the Old Continent models were discarded and new identity was sought
- at the beginning of the twentieth century **Israel Zangwill** (1864–1926), a British playwright, produced his play *The Melting Pot* (1908), which suggests that different nationalities come to the U. S. to be melted to Americans
- Horace Kallen (1882–1974), a Jewish American philosopher, proposed the idea of pluralism as an alternative in his essays *Democracy Versus the Melting Pot* (1915) and *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea* (1956)
- the present concept is that of a ‘**salad bowl**’, suggesting that the individual ingredients are clearly recognizable

### Native Americans

Beginnings

- forced from their original habitations in the South and Northeast to Oklahoma, Arizona, Texas or New Mexico
- the oldest of ethnic literatures as to the **oral tradition** of individual tribes, the youngest to become published
- the natives used to have an inferior social status, their numerous different languages slowed down translations
- the first translations into English often lost the original onomatopoeic quality and the character of performance
- the most exploited genres are autobiographical prose, poetry and plays typically on tribal or personal history

Renaissance

- the Native American Renaissance (since 1960s) seeks to restore the oral tradition, transforming it into writing
- the literature is influenced in form and content by the oral tradition of tribe rituals, songs and creation stories
- the usual themes are exploration of the relationship to the **heritage of ancestors**, indictment of European and American imperialism and challenging the conventional myths about the Indians, including the Noble Savage
- frequent motifs are the figure of a trickster presented as a god, an animal or a human being endowed with supernatural power or the notion of **nonlinear time** as a cyclical repetition of the seasons and lives of ancestors

### Leslie Marmon Silko (b. 1948)

Writing  
Features

- a member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe, her parents descended from Laguna and Plains tribes mixed with whites
- the Laguna people were variously influenced by the cultures of neighbouring tribes and by Spanish colonizers, newcomers to the pueblo brought with them their own rituals and myths which were incorporated into Laguna
- the author registers the plural and changing nature of the ceremonies, she associates change with vital growth
- the essentials of a ritual are repetition and recurrence, a rhythm of **continuity and change** links word to world
- catches the native culture as continuous with language and landscape, perceives her world as ‘made of stories’
- presents her fiction as a continuation of the oral tradition, renews and retells old tales and links past to present

Poetry  
Collection

#### *Laguna Woman* (1974)

- her first published book, a poetry collection devoted mostly to the exploration of her Laguna Pueblo heritage

Fiction  
Masterpiece

#### *Ceremony* (1977)

- a novel featuring a mixed-blood veteran of the Second World War who returns back to his tribe in New Mexico
- the protagonist feels dispossessed and disoriented, missing the sense of belonging to America he had in the war
- his home presents him with a disconcerting mix of the old and new, all things have a white and an Indian name
- there arises a tension between the new urban Indians and the perpetuation of ceremonies by the medicine men
- the protagonist feels sick and seeks advice from a medicine man, also of mixed origin, who instructs him in the ineluctable nature of the new and teaches him about ceremonies that will **accommodate change** and complexity

Hybrid  
Culture

- dismisses the binary split of white against red, new against old, and invents a hybrid culture and hybrid rituals
- distinguishes between ‘witchery’ that treats the world as dead and ceremony through which the world is alive
- the symbol of witchery is the atomic bomb, whose explosion was witnessed by the protagonist’s grandmother<sup>1</sup>, who sees the bomb as uniting humanity under the threat of annihilation and leading them to a **redemptive ritual**
- the protagonist finally experiences the redemptive ceremony, one which incorporates all into a vision of peace

Poetry  
& Stories

#### *Storyteller* (1981)

- an interlinked collection of poems and short stories, including fictional stories, family stories and tribal tales
- contains also some of her most frequently anthologized short stories, for instance ‘Yellow Woman’ or ‘Lullaby’

<sup>1</sup> The first atomic explosion occurred historically little more than a hundred miles from the habitation of the Laguna Pueblo people.

## Louise Erdrich (b. 1954)

- Reservation Writing • a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in North Dakota, of mixed German and Chippewa origin  
 • devoted much of her career to a tetralogy set on and around a fictional Chippewa **reservation** in North Dakota

### *Love Medicine* (1984)

- Interwoven Narratives • a series of narratives told by various members of two families living on the reservation in 1970s and 1980s  
 • the stories are free-standing but the fates of the narrators are intertwined, they appear in on another's stories  
 • the narrators intermix humour and despair as they tell stories of survival, focusing in particular upon women

### Story as History *The Beet Queen* (1986)

- the second novel of her tetralogy, spans over the period of forty years, taking in a large gallery of characters  
 • begins with two children leaping from a boxcar, so becoming orphaned and seeking a refuge with their aunt  
 • tells the tales of extraordinary people and does not hesitate to employ folktale, myth, ritual and magic realism  
 • weaves the stories of several people together into one densely layered tapestry and also **links story to history**  
 • relates what happens with her characters to the larger narratives of what goes on between Indians and whites

### Native History *Tracks* (1988)

- the third novel of her tetralogy, powerfully forges a link between personal story and Native American history  
 • opens with the challenge of white disease killing Native peoples, a paradigm of cultural invasion and crisis  
 • shows the traumatic effects of epidemic disease, land loss, confinement on reservations, intertribal conflicts  
 • illustrates the clash between those resistant to the assimilation pressures and those more positively responsive  
 • presents history not as a singular objective narrative but rather as a multidimensional creation of various voices  
 • structures the story around two alternating narrators, a conservative Chippewa man and a progressive woman of mixed Chippewa and white origin who denies her Indian identity and leaves the community to become a nun  
 • the male storyteller, called Nanapush, recalls his life from the time when the Chippewa still lived freely off the land, hunting and gathering, living with the earth, to when they lived off government supplies on the reservation  
 • conjures up the **animistic world** when people like Nanapush still resort to magic and medicine for guidance  
 • Nanapush is a carrier of folktale and legend, linked by his name with a Chippewa trickster from oral stories  
 • Nanapush serves as a government interpreter and mediator when he is young, later is elected tribal chairman  
 • the novel tells a story of triumph not despite but through tragedy, **heroism of continuance** against all the odds

### Native Present *The Bingo Palace* (1994)

- the fourth novel of her tetralogy, the title refers to a bingo parlour owned by a progressive Chippewa member  
 • the protagonist is a young Chippewa man who has returned home from the city in search of a meaningful life  
 • the novel shows the tensions created by the proposal of the bingo owner for the young man to invest with him  
 • explores the difference between the solidity of ritual, ceremony and community and the abstractions of power  
 • elaborates also on the traditional theme of perceiving the **land as an extension of being** rather than real estate

## James Welch (1940–2003)

- Writing Features • a member of Blackfeet tribe, of mixed Blackfeet and Gros Ventre origin, brought up on a Montana reservation  
 • develops a laconic, terse narrative style, tightly rhythmic and repetitive, marked by a bleak, oblique humour  
 • recalls the early fiction of **Hemingway** with his style, tone and concentration on the mood rather than the plot  
 • his four novels may be seen as a tetralogy which sets the pride of the Native American past against the pity of the present and which suggests that one small recompense in a world of drift and loss is a **recovery of ancestry**

### Existential Feelings *Winter in the Blood* (1974)

- his first novel features a protagonist who is a drifter, marked by a haunting sense of **alienation** and loss, and who feels 'no hatred, no love, no guilt, no conscience, nothing but a distance that had grown through the years'

### *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979)

- like the preceding novel presents a protagonist who had a promising athletic career in youth but now hardly lives his life and sees in his father what he might become himself, outsider living on the fringes of white culture  
 • the estranged protagonists of both novels are aimless apathetic creatures seeking **relief in drink** and casual sex

### Native History *Fool's Crow* (1986)

- the novel is set in the late nineteenth century in a **Blackfeet camp**, suffused with Indian custom and ceremony  
 • retells an actual historical tale about the decline of tribal life through the title character, a young medicine man, who sees the danger posed by the whites and knows that his people must either wage a futile war or surrender

### Cultural Division *Indian Lawyer* (1990)

- the novel shows a materially comfortable protagonist who made his escape from the poor life on a reservation  
 • the protagonist moves between two worlds, one white and one Indian, feeling adrift and out of place in both

## Asian Americans

- Immigration History
- the first Asian immigrants came to the United State in the half of the nineteenth century, they were attracted at first by the Gold Rush and then by jobs available at railway constructions, settled mostly at the Western Coast
  - welcomed by their employers as hard-working and loyal, but evoked **xenophobia** in the rest of the population
  - the Nationality Act (1870) declared Asian Americans aliens, denied them civil rights and American citizenship
  - the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) made marriages of Chinese American men to white American women illegal
  - the Immigration and Nationality Act (1965) abolished the quotas restricting immigration from Asian countries
- Immigration Writing
- Asian American literature was at first written in the original languages for audiences within their community
  - includes mostly the Chinese and Japanese, but also writers with roots in Korea, the Philippines or South Asia
  - Chinese and Japanese literature is the oldest within the Asian American context, other ethnics follow only later
  - the first Chinese literature emerged in the San Francisco **China Town**, the largest Asian American community
  - the most frequent subjects are China Town life, celebration of traditional Chinese culture, negative reactions against assimilation, chronicle of hard work and also rise of feminism among Chinese American women writers
  - the first influential anthology of Asian writing was *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974) which aimed to shatter the stereotypical image of Asians as the exemplary minority that got easily assimilated

### Maxine Hong Kingston (b. 1940)

- the author is a second-generation Chinese American who never saw China and knows it from her mother only

#### *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975)

- Ethnic Growing-Up Novel
- her first book, an intentionally **hybrid form** with elements of memoir, autobiography, biography, myth, fiction
  - recounts the childhood experiences of a young girl, mixing adolescent confusion and ironic adult commentary
  - offers a feminist perspective, negotiating both the sexism of traditional China and the racism of white America, presents the young girl protagonist as caught up between her Chinese inheritance and her American upbringing
  - separates the narrative into five sections, each following the development of the girl into the woman warrior
  - tells in each section the story of a particular woman and maternal figure, an inspirational character who has a formative influence on the protagonist and who may be both actual and mythical, a ghostly and a real presence
  - promotes a growth **from silence to speech**, discloses the necessity to speak oneself into being and into identity
  - the narrator sifts through the cultural fragments she inherits through her mother and reinvents them for her own purposes, reinvigorates the ancient Chinese tradition by investing old stories with a liberating feminist bias
- Telling & Retelling
- ‘No Name Woman’ opens the book and reveals the narrator’s aunt’s illegitimate pregnancy, shaming and suicide, told by the narrator’s mother as a cautionary tale and injunction against the passing on of familial shame
  - the narrator reimagines her aunt’s story as an emancipatory narrative about a woman who had her vengeance on Chinese patriarchal culture and those who would shame her by casting her body into the family drinking well
  - the family punishes the aunt by forgetting her existence, the narrator redresses the balance by telling about her
  - ‘White Tigers’ revises the story of a woman warrior of ancient **Chinese legend**, told by the narrator’s mother, and attributes some of the exploits and experiences normally associated with male warriors to the female figure
  - ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’ concludes the book, describes an actual historical figure of a woman who was captured and forced to live in the ‘barbarian’ lands where she heard a strange music produced on reed flutes
  - the captured woman learned how to sing in a way that ‘matched the flutes’ and brought the songs back to home
  - suggests that the solution to the problem of identity is not to collapse the differences but to accommodate them
  - demonstrates how to find a refuge and redemption in telling, to make **words weapons** of the woman warrior

#### *China Men* (1980)

- Fathers & Daughters
- her second book, a similar hybrid like the preceding, draws on the imaginative revisioning of a historical fact
  - draws also on family history in dealing with the uncommunicative relationship between father and daughter
  - claims America for the Chinese by showing how deeply in debt the country is to the labour of Chinese men

#### *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989)

- Chinese Whitman
- a novel in a fluid, evasive form, blurring the lines between naturalism and myth, the material and the magical
  - recounts the exploits of Wittman Ah Sing, a ‘Chinese beatnik’, a contemporary incarnation of Walt **Whitman**
  - refers to a Chinese classic about a magical and mischievous monkey accompanying a monk on a trip to India
  - resists a monolithic notion of American identity, naming multiplicity as the core of personal and national self

### Amy Tan (b. 1952)

- Children & Parents
- the author is among the first generation of Chinese Americans to be born and brought up in the United States
  - deals with bilingual and bicultural dilemmas and with the poignant relationship with one’s immigrant parents

***The Joy Luck Club*** (1989)

Mothers &amp; Daughters

- concentrates on the relationship of **mothers and daughters** as a measure of cultural changes and continuities
- a series of narratives telling about eight women, the four original members of the club and their four daughters
- the four mothers meet to devise their own moments of respite, gossip and anecdote around the mah-jong table
- the women meet every week even after their immigration to America and despite deprivation and devastation
- the mothers continue to commune, talk, praise and complain about their daughters until one of the mother dies

Generation Contests

- the novel makes two complete rounds of the table and so explores the generational contests that form its core
- shows the mothers outraged by their daughters' independence and the daughters rebelling against obedience
- suggests that even the daughters have a sense of continuity and connection when one daughter travels to China after her mother's death, meets the twin daughters of her mother's first marriage and discovers her blood bonds
- the young woman learns to balance her competing identities by **retrieving the past**, the history of her mother

***The Kitchen God's Wife*** (1991)

Mothers &amp; Husbands

- the novel continues her explorations of mothers and daughters in narrating successively the stories of them all
- the title derives from a Chinese fable about an abusive husband who still became known as 'The Kitchen God'

Sisters

***The Hundred Secret Senses*** (1995)

- the novel focuses on the relationship between **sisters**, one born still in China and the other already in America