

Introduction

This issue presents a selection of prose and poetry by some of the leading Native American writers at work today. It also tacitly represents various approaches to present-day North American Indian engagements with ‘traditional’ Native American verbal expression. The precise contents of the issue – which grew out of a fusion of opportunism, serendipity and long-nourished interest in Native American cultural expression – reflect its genealogy: the guest editor’s knowledge and contacts (and lack of same), constraints of space and finance, and *Stand*’s location in Europe. Some potential contributions slipped away, and there is, obviously, much material that it would have been good to include if all things were equal. Anyhow, we hope readers will enjoy what *is* here: prose fiction by Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa), who – and in a range of genres – is generally acknowledged as at the very forefront of Native American writing today; prose fiction and prose poetry by Misha Nogha (Cree/Métis/Nordic), who is rapidly establishing a distinctive reputation, especially for her stories; poetry and prose by Carter Revard (Osage), an elder statesman among Native American – and American – literary figures; and poetry by Lance Henson (Cheyenne), a Native American poet much published in the US and long resident in Europe (and long a champion of Native American poetry at meetings of European students of Native America). The issue is rounded out by two short review essays: Rachel Farebrother on works of new Native American poetry in the adventurous Earthworks series put out by Salt, the independent publishing company based in Cambridge (details at <http://www.saltpublishing.com>); and the guest editor on a significant anthology of American Indian traditional expression compiled by a regular *Stand* contributor, Brian Swann (see, for example, *Stand*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 21-22).

Since, of course, all pre-Columbian native mythmaking, song, oratory, poetry, ceremony and legend took place in indigenous languages, and since – despite truly horrendous linguistic losses – many indigenous languages still survive, any consideration of engagements with the traditional will also inevitably raise issues of translation. It will be appreciated that the engagement with the traditional takes many forms. Allow me to outline just one example, using the biography of one of our contributors. Lance Henson grew up on an Oklahoma reservation farm among members of the Native American Church, peyote people, and is proud of his membership of the Cheyenne Dog Soldier Warrior Society. He served as a marine in the Vietnam War and has held writer-in-residence positions at a number of educational institutions. Though during his sojourn abroad he has produced countless ‘European’ poems, it is fair to say that he first established himself as a writer with a poetry of predominantly natural imagery that intimates nostalgia for a vanished past. Clearly, he has been influenced by the Beats – recently producing an elegy for Charles Bukowski – but, whether in lyrics evoking Dutch or Italian settings or the truck stops of American highways, a sense of ‘Indianness’ is frequently at issue. Often he links a seemingly personal experience, as in ‘cheyenne ceremonial grounds,’ which records a visit to a site of Sun Dance rituals (though this is not explicitly stated), with an awareness of wider cultural loss, creating an act of mourning. Though the selection here includes only one example, this is probably most apparent in those poems either written in Cheyenne and translated into English or written in English to give, in his term, ‘impressions’ of their existence in Cheyenne. The theme of this issue has meant that in selecting the poems published here, we have probably not given enough rein to Henson’s overtly political and, often, angry poems, such as ‘another song for America,’ which obliquely remembers the incident at Kent State University where students peacefully demonstrating against the Vietnam War were shot down by the National Guard: ‘god damn you america/ what have you done to your children/ the wind speaks their names/ any way you breathe it.’ Modern ‘america’ and modern Native America jostle and intermingle here.

They do so, too, in varying manners, in the lives and work of Misha Nogha, Carter Revard, and Gerald Vizenor (see the Notes on Contributors). Much critical material, perhaps

the most illuminating of it written by Vizenor, rightly stresses the necessity and desirability of mixing traditional and 'European'-derived forms.¹ I have been privileged to hear Vizenor explain how the revivalist religion of the Ghost Dance, with its roots in older Paiute culture, was transmitted across the Plains in English, by graduates of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and that when Big Foot's band of Ghost Dancer believers was massacred by the 7th Cavalry in the winter of 1890, news of this atrocity was also first circulated among Native people, in English, by these same Indian graduates. 'Survivance' is a complex matter, whether we think of peoples or their cultural expression, or both, and some of its attendant ambiguities are caught in Vizenor's appropriation (which has also been deployed by Revard). Perhaps with a nod to *survivance*, the French for mere 'survival,' the term as used by Vizenor also takes on the more active sense of persistence, grit, over the passing of time *and* of having already come through. Yet, at the same time, survivance is not a given, but an ongoing engagement. The writings in this issue of *Stand* are also testimony to this fact.

'Raven Asks Pontiac', the print by Larry McNeil which features as both cover image and frontispiece, also exemplifies an ambivalent use of tradition. The print is part of a sequence that is itself a component of McNeil's *Fly by Night Mythology*, a series all based on superb photographic imagery. In it, Raven, both bird and totemic figure to Larry McNeil's Tlingit people, asks a question of Pontiac, but this Pontiac is not the leader of a Native people in the manner of the revered eighteenth-century historical figure Pontiac, but, it seems, the Pontiac automobile! 'Why are you asking so many questions?' Pontiac asks. 'I like shiny stuff, and boy are you shiny', says Raven. As McNeil has written in an exhibition note, the Raven sequence actually asks 'why certain images become revered icons and others become negative stereotypes'.

Most of the items in this issue have not been published before, but some have appeared previously, if usually in an earlier version, and are used here by permission of their authors. Copyright in all cases is held by the authors. I would like to thank each of them for their cheerful responses to my queries and for allowing us to print their work. Thanks, too, to Clifford Trafzer – scholar, anthologist, and one of the first of my Indian friends – for help and encouragement, to Louise Ward for technical assistance and good cheer, and to the innovative and patient *Stand* editorial team.

Mick Gidley

¹ *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (1992; Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999). If there had been more space, it would have been good to print here more of the plainly 'European-derived' work of each of the contributors. For example, Revard has made exciting 'translations' of medieval French quatrains and often mixes 'Indian' and 'European' forms, as in his set of riddles for his collection *How The Songs Come Down* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005), two from middle English and one Osage.