Book Review


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Native American Rhetoric edited by Lawrence W. Gross is a worthwhile and engaging collection of essays that explore the cultural and spiritual foundations of rhetorical communication in a variety of Indigenous communities across North America. ‘Rhetoric’ may perhaps be a problematic term within Indigenous Studies, stemming as it does from settler colonial strategies and modes of discourse. However, Gross and his contributors offer a unique take on the term, rejecting settler colonial assumptions that limit ‘rhetoric’ to confrontational and argumentative agendas, steeped in a spirit of competition. By contrast, Gross argues that claiming a rightful place for Indigenous voices within rhetorical analysis reveals a different ontological orientation, one grounded in cultivating ‘harmony, consensus and unity’, and with a ‘completely different purpose’ (6).

Gross’ framing of this work locates it squarely within the purview of religious studies, making it essential reading for those who would understand Indigenous worldviews and the spiritual principles that undergird Indigenous traditions. As Gross argues in his introduction, ‘we are not simply looking at speech patterns’ but instead ‘showing how Native American rhetoric is grounded firmly in the cultural and religious ideals of a given tradition’ (3). While previous work on the subject has considered Native American rhetoric as a means of resistance against settler colonialism and survivance in a neocolonial context (4), this volume prefers to examine and theorize Native American rhetoric ‘from within the traditions themselves’ (5). In doing so, the volume makes a unique and valuable contribution to the work of understanding Native American philosophical orientations, and how those orientations manifest in oral, written, and performative modes of communication.
The chapters are thoughtfully organized to carry readers across Native North America, reflecting Indigenous ceremonial protocols that often begin in the east, before moving to the south, then west, and concluding in the north.

The journey begins in the Northeast with case studies that consider the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinaabe. The first case study by Philip P. Arnold considers the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address and explains how its focus on consensus emerges from the sacred teachings of the people. As Arnold explains, the Address works to bring minds together, to find common ground within a spirit of gratitude, and in doing so to maintain the sacred balance within the world. The Address reinforces the lesson that ‘human beings exist only because of the generosity of other-than-human-beings’. As such, the Address serves ‘to remind us of how humility and respect are not just a matter of being polite, but are also the way human beings can survive’ (44).

Gross’ contribution to the volume explores digressions in Anishinaabe rhetoric. Digressions stand alongside storytelling, the use of personal experience, repetition, and speaking from the heart as key elements of rhetoric that reinforce Anishinaabe values. Gross argues that digressions in particular are not momentary lapses of focus or simply examples of nonlinear thinking, but rather a reflection of core Anishinaabe worldviews. ‘In using digressions, Anishinaabe speakers are exploring the connections between all things. The notion that all things are related’, as such the rhetorical turn is not simply stylistic, but ‘arises from Anishinaabe morality. So, in effect the use of digressions by Anishinaabe speakers is at heart a moral act’ (48).

The book then travels southward, with three case studies considering the rhetorical experience of Indigenous communities in the borderlands and in Mexico. In her essay, Delores Mondragón considers chicana/o/x rhetoric, and testimonio in particular, arguing that such modes of communication empower and express mestiza consciousness by ‘naming their experience’, and therefore ‘asserting their presence’. Testimonios provide a means of bridging the individual experience with collective histories and respond to the historical pressures of ‘de-indianization’ of these communities.

Felicia Rhapsody Lopez’s chapter provides a nuanced consideration of the Nahua codices, particularly around pregnancy and childbirth. Lopez’s piece offers a striking challenge to the privileging of phonetic writing within rhetorical analysis and calls for the inclusion of visual and glyphic representations. Such images reflect Nahua conceptions of the cosmos and human ontology while also serving as persuasive modes of communication. As she argues, ‘these narratives do not function as abstract metaphors, but rather function as yet another example of
Nahua knowledge about how the ways we treat our food and the world around us have dramatic impact on our health and the health of future generations’ (98).

Seth Schermerhorn’s essay ‘O’odham, Too: How to Speak to Rattlesnakes’, carries on this work of unsettling previous assumptions about the nature of rhetoric to expand the audience to include other-than-human persons. This chapter explores the transborder communities of the Tohono O’odham, and the way in which they appeal to and seek to persuade rattlesnakes. Schermerhorn argues that if various plants and animals are regarded as human—and even more as O’odham—then speech directed toward animals such as snakes is both rhetorical—meant to persuade—and deeply informed by O’odham ontologies.

Traveling to the Southwest, two case studies consider the power inherent in Indigenous languages and their incorporation into political and ceremonial rhetoric. Meredith Moss’s essay ‘Sounding Navajo: Understanding Navajo Public Speaking’, examines the significance of bookending (including Navajo language at the beginning and end of public addresses) and code switching (inserting commonly understood Navajo phrases or pronunciations of English terms within an oration). Moss makes the case that the use of Navajo language is a powerful speech act, establishing ‘a clear argument for the social positioning of the speaker’s identity’, and establishing ‘the speaker’s ethos, or credibility in speaking on the topic’ (128, 135).

In her piece, ‘Agency of the Ancestors’, Inés Talamantez argues that sacred power, diiyii, is present in Apache language and the natural world. As she explains, ‘indeed, the diiyii in our language is a potent force that the people have utilized for contending with ongoing traumas, such as missionary fervor for our conversion, political subjugation, and environmental destruction’ (137). The use and meditation upon Apache language supports the cultivation of wisdom (a clear, resilient mind, and steadfast mind). As Talamantez argues,

> wisdom and rhetoric are generally considered a form of power to persuade others with the goal of helping others to maintain the ecological balance of the natural world… our religious protocol teaches us how to live in balance. This is critically important since Apache is not a written language and we must attentively listen to our elders reveal the wisdom that we inherit from our oral traditions. (161)

Turning west, three essays consider the ways in which modes of communication reflect core values and spiritual commitments among coastal communities. Cutcha Risling Baldy’s excellent essay ‘Why We Fish: Decolonizing Salmon Rhetorics and Governance’, decouples the idea of ‘rhetoric’ from its settler colonial associations, reclaiming the
persuasive work of Indigenous waterkeepers and salmon protectors. As Baldy argues, Hupa salmon rhetoric arises from and reflects the peoples’ close relationships with salmon. ‘A history of salmon governance in California has ignored rhetorics of relationship for rhetorics of economy and science, which has in turn led to devastating consequences not only for the salmon but also for Native peoples’. By contrast, salmon rhetorics are ‘building and shaping rhetorical sovereignty among California Indian people’ (166). Salmon rhetoric can take the form of song, dance, testimony, storytelling, theater, and ceremonies along the river. As she concludes,

you can tell, they think the science is the most important, the numbers. But I want us to remember that our science is relationships and that we solidified this in our languages, in our stories, in our theories and our practices and methodologies and in our rhetorics’ (188).

Danica Miller’s essay, ‘Hey Cousin! Rhetorics of the Lower Coast Salish’, continues this consideration of the ways kin-centric and relational ontologies shape rhetoric and build communities. In this case study, Miller shows how the spiritual valuation of relationships, familial love, reciprocity and respect guide and inspire the forms of Coast Salish rhetoric. As she explains, Lower Coast Salish people traditionally lived together

harmoniously, not because we were of one mind and habit, but because we understood the value of respect, the interdependency of community, and the importance of our family relations. Our rhetoric of familial clan kinships continues this longhouse tradition of mutual understanding... our rhetoric is based on the relations we all share and shared. Everyone was related, which is so beautiful it almost hurts (197, 200).

In this analysis of Tlingit filmmaker Duane Gustant, Gabriel Estrada’s essay, ‘The Two Spirit Tlingit Film Rhetoric of Aucoin’s My Own Private Lower Post’, considers how film can work as a rhetorical device for healing from the soul wounds of colonialism writ large and the more particular traumas of two spirit people. Strategically employing Teslin Tlingit language, Gustant’s film explores the challenges of sobriety, of recovering from residential schools, and the challenges of rematriation and reclaiming of two spirit identities. Estrada argues that ‘Aucoin’s foregrounding of the Tlingit language in the beginning and end of the film makes important rhetorical statements about linguistic sovereignty that counter the Indian residential school’s attempt to eradicate Indigenous language and culture’ (209). The work also argues for a cultural revitalization ‘in which two-spirit people remain political leaders, clan members, co-parents, storytellers, rhetors, and healers’. As such
the film is ‘a rhetorical move to activate our own two-spirit culture and healing’ (223).

Phyllis Fast’s essay on Koyukon riddles takes us farther North to central Alaska. The use of riddles for both entertainment and education provided means of ensuring the Koyukon knowledge and culture survived. As Fast explains, riddling was deeply rooted within linguistic and cultural understandings of the world, including ethnic and gendered identifiers, and a close relational knowledge of the natural world. Fast explains that riddles were not just intellectual exercises, but a means of determining if others ‘think like other Koyukon do’ (237).

Ines Hernandez Avila concludes the volume with her reflection on Coyote as rhetorician. Avila interprets Peter Blue Cloud Aroniawenrate’s Elderberry Flute Song: Contemporary Coyote Tales from a trans-Indigenous Niimipuuuean perspective. Her consideration of such coyote tales is likewise informed by N. Scott Momaday’s ideas of ‘the word’ (articulated in the sermon by his character the Reverend John Big Bluff Tosamah, the Priest of the sun in House Made of Dawn), and Chadwick Allan’s ideas of the trans-Indigenous. As Avila argues, Coyote has power to survive through intelligence and wits, embracing mad dancing, laughing, sympathy, and exaltation. ‘Coyote, the teacher, the healer, the elder, is what can help transcend cultural differences and build coalitions’ (263).

Taken as a whole, this volume makes a valuable contribution to the fields of Native American religious studies, Indigenous cultural studies, and literary and rhetorical analysis, helping to center the ways in which sacred teachings infuse and inform Indigenous lifeways—including strategic, ceremonial, and creative communication. This book successfully uplifts the ontological, spiritual, and ethical foundations behind Native American rhetoric, taking an important pivot away from a focus on resistance and survivance and toward the internal workings of the communities themselves. The scope of essays is impressive, providing as it does a wide sweep of traditions from across the continent, challenging what we think of as ‘rhetoric’, and proposing an expansive understanding that includes the visual and the ceremonial alongside written and spoken performance.