
REVIEWS

Karl Kroeber. *Artistry in Native American Myths*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. 292p.

LINDA LIZUT HELSTERN
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, CARBONDALE

In his most recent book, respected scholar Karl Kroeber reaffirms his commitment to bringing an understanding of traditional Native American Indian myths, often known outside tribal communities only by anthropologists and folklorists, to a broad multicultural readership. His anthology *Traditional Literatures of the American Indian: Texts and Interpretations*, recently reissued, has been in print for nearly two decades. Kroeber's unofficial career as an editor of Indian stories, however, goes back to his childhood. In *Artistry in Native American Myths*, Kroeber confesses that he once told a Yurok storyteller, who had just finished relating a traditional tale to his anthropologist father, that he hadn't told the story correctly. The young Karl had heard this story before, and he recognized some significant differences between the tellings. There could be but one correct version, according to the reigning view of myth, and to Karl's way of thinking, the first story he had heard was the correct one.

This is but one truism Kroeber seeks to correct in his comprehensive reconsideration of Native myth in light of contemporary scholarship in the field of ethnopoetics. It is now accepted that myths exist in the multiplicity of their tellings, and that the art of myth telling lies in the details the teller chooses for a specific occasion and audience. Another misapprehension Kroeber seeks to correct, and one that he himself has perpetrated, is the idea that myth is literature, defined as aesthetic discourse. Myth serves traditional tellers and listeners in practical ways that imaginative literature does not. Approaches to Native myth, he notes, have too often been colored by the Western bias toward print and original authorship, even judged by standards applied to literary production and found wanting, their seeming simplicity proof of Western progress over "primitive" cultures.

Central to Kroeber's reconsideration is the fundamental orality of myth. Even our best attempts to conceptualize oral cultures, he suggests, are contaminated by our experience of literacy. Kroeber notes two markers that distinguish oral stories from stories in print. The first is the degree of repetition inherent in traditional

tellings. Such repetition has often been edited out of print versions. The second is the modular configuration of the Native myths, which may be told with as few or as many of the constituent building blocks as the teller deems appropriate to a given situation. This modularity is one reason for the variations in stories noted by anthropologists, who have tended to criticize the shortened versions as incomplete.

The heart of orality, however, lies in the intimacy of the relationship between teller and audience, and it is here that Kroeber focuses his explication. After a chapter in which he traces the roots of ethnopoetics to Boasian anthropology with its focus on the individual teller and telling as opposed to structural anthropology's penchant for generalization and classification, Kroeber attempts, as best he can in print, to give readers the flavor of the oral experience, what he calls "mythic imagining." Among the myths that open his second chapter, Kroeber includes four versions of the Yurok myth of the creation of money and three versions of the Blackfoot myth of Scarface. Their juxtaposition is intended to engage the reader's critical faculty for comparison and contrast. Traditional listeners, he suggests, would have had a similar response upon hearing stories repeated. Apparent simplicity is really unstated complexity, for the teller's altered focus highlights the purpose of the current telling.

Each of Kroeber's five chapters follows a three-part format: a selection of myths followed by commentary and notes. In his third chapter, Kroeber considers stories of human/animal marriage from five different tribes, which gives him the opportunity to explore a fundamental difference between Euroamerican and Native cultures. Tribal peoples honor the legitimacy of nonhuman cultures with their unique languages and mores. In his fourth chapter, Kroeber presents seven trickster-transformer stories, although he does not explicitly mention that every Native tribe has its tribal trickster. With his hyphenated descriptor, Kroeber emphasizes Trickster's paradoxical nature, for he is often a creator figure as well as one who commits serious cultural transgressions, as complex as the life force and as contradictory as our natural behavior patterns.

In his fifth chapter, Kroeber seeks to correct one final misapprehension about Native myth: that it is immutable and unchanging. Kroeber suggests that myths, like the tribes themselves, respond to alterations of historical circumstance. He offers here two among many recorded versions of the Lakota myth of Stone Boy. Though contemporaneous (the first version published in 1907, the second recorded about 1910), the versions end differently. The second omits the concluding module with its white buffalo herd. Kroeber attributes this change in the story

to the permanently altered lifestyle of Bad Wound and his audience that came with the decimation of the buffalo.

Both for those who have read widely in the field and for those to whom this book will serve as an introduction, *Artistry in Native American Myth* stands as an excellent summary and application of the scholarship on orality over the past four decades. Kroeber incorporates not only the groundbreaking work of anthropologists like Barre Toelken and Keith Basso but also that of Native scholar/theorist Gerald Vizenor, whose conception of Trickster as “a sign in a language game” is fundamental to Kroeber’s explication. Despite Kroeber’s careful elucidation of the nature of oral story, however, he allows several difficulties inherent in preparing a volume of traditional Native stories to go largely unexamined. First, these stories are, with one exception, translations, some contemporary, some from early in this century. With respect to Native stories, there is more at stake than a problem of translation stylistics, however. While the translations Kroeber uses may be impeccable, editors and translators have a long history of radically altering the content of Native stories. Even where the problems of translation accuracy are most acute, in relation to the often-expurgated Trickster stories, Kroeber sidesteps the issue entirely without so much as a note to guide novices. He offers instead the model of Barre Toelken’s exemplary reevaluation of his original translation ten years on as a parable of telling and hearing in oral cultures, where the vitality of myth is rife with “uncertainties.”

If Kroeber attempts in his notes to provide some basic tribal background in an effort to contextualize the stories, they remain largely decontextualized. This volume leaves the unfortunate impression that myths were the only stories told in Native communities. What we learn about the relationship between the teller and the anthropologist/collector does not substitute for the sense of the storytelling matrix that these myths exist within. Reference to descriptions of this matrix by such Native writers as Leslie Silko and Gerald Vizenor would help to counter this impression. That Kroeber routinely employs the term *myth*, even as he notes that “nobody agrees on what myths are, or what their functions might be” stands at variance with contemporary Native writers, who use the term *story* exclusively. For readers of literature, myth carries with it an array of associations, including the suggestion of religious significance. This hints at one of the ongoing controversies between tribal peoples and the anthropologists who have collected their stories. Whether traditional myths should be told at all outside their tribal context remains a hotly debated issue in Native communities. It is an issue that Kroeber never touches. ❀