Fletcher: 'Native American Fiction' tough on Indian culture

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by: Matthew L.M. Fletcher

University of Minnesota professor David Treuer, Leech Lake Ojibwe, offers a new way of looking at the culture of Indian people in his 2006 book of literary criticism, "Native American Fiction: A User's Manual." He takes on other literary critics, especially those who critique the work of Indian novelists such as Sherman Alexie, Leslie Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko and James Welch for creating a genre of literature that Treuer does not believe exists - "Native American fiction." Treuer argues that the work of great Indian writers isn't any more authentic than "The Education of Little Tree" or "Hanta Yo."

Treuer concludes that there can be no such thing as "Native American fiction," in part, because Indian people never wrote fiction in the form of novels. Indian storytellers were not novelists and any Indian writing novels cannot possibly be writing in the vein of "Native Americans." His argument goes beyond a jab at literary critics - he attacks Alexie, for example, as perpetuating stereotypical images of Indian people by using motifs such as "Indian tears" in his story collection "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven." He lands similar body blows on both Silko's "Ceremony" and Welch's "Name of Bock." But he reserves special disapproval for Erdrich, focusing on her imperfect use of Anishinaabemowin (the language of the Anishinaabek) in her novels. He lauds her earnest attempts to learn the language and to incorporate the language into her writing, but ultimately concludes that her work is not authentic Indian culture. He compares Erdrich's work to a copy of a Van Gogh masterpiece and asserts that no one would pay big bucks for a mere copy.

Treuer's specific conclusion focuses on his assertion that their novels are not examples of true Indian culture (or as he refers to it - "my cultural patrimony"). He believes that good writing by American Indian authors that appears to bring to life the culture of American Indian people is not like that at all, but instead is just a very good copy of Indian culture. These writers invoke Indian culture, he says, as a "memory," not "reality." According to Treuer, Erdrich's use of Anishinaabemowin "highlights the longing for culture, not its presence." Treuer remarks that Erdrich's writing is excellent because it so closely mimics Indian culture without actually being Indian culture.

Indian culture must evolve and change or it will die - just like all other nations' laws and cultures. Treuer's Indian culture is a culture that is monolithic and unchanging. In his view, Indian people either know their culture or they do not - there is no discovering tribal culture for those who do not know it. Erdrich's attempt through her writing to incorporate tribal stories into a modern context, for Treuer, fails because it is not the way a Turtle Mountain Ojibwe storyteller would have told those stories in 1900 or 1845 or 1776 or 1492. But Treuer refuses to consider the possibility that perhaps Erdrich is exploring a memory of the culture that preserves it for the people of modern North Dakota and Minnesota Chippewa tribes - and in the process making that cultural memory a reality. And the same is true for the work of Alexie, Silko and Welch. Their amazing gift is the ability to bring that cultural memory a reality. And the same is true for the work of Alexie, Silko and Welch. Their amazing gift is the ability to bring that cultural memory a reality.

Treuer goes way too far in this vein. One way to highlight this problem is to compare the goal of modern Indian tribal governments and tribal courts to restore tribal customary law as an important piece of the legal infrastructure of Indian tribes. The reason, of course, to consider customary law is to preserve the lifeways and law ways of Indian people, a critical part of preserving and advancing Indian cultures. But it is not so easy task. Tribes and their judges recognize that the customary law of their ancestors is difficult to discover and apply - tribal customary law, for many tribal communities, exists only as a memory. Some customary law may be lost forever and other portions of customary law may be incompletely recovered or uncertain. But tribal courts press onward with the hope that modern law and customary law may somehow merge and become an accurate and useful representation of how the people of a particular Indian community should live, something that Vine Deloria Jr. and Clifford Lytle predicted when they wrote that "custom law [alone] ... could not again become the base for community cohesion and law and order."

Treuer is making an argument that many non-Indian policy-makers make all the time when opposing tribal decisions. For example, game hunters argue against Indian people never used slot machines in their gaming, so they should be forbidden from doing so now. Treaty fishing rights opponents argue that Indian people never used modern fishing techniques in treaty times, so they should be forbidden to do so now. These arguments fail because Indian culture adapts to the modern circumstances. Treuer should allow Indian writers to utilize the new methods - like writing novels. Even imperfect use of Anishinaabemowin, as Treuer should well know, contributes to the culture and even to the language.

To be fair, Treuer isn't prohibiting Indian writers from writing novels. What he rails against is Indian writers claiming to be Indian writers. But the dangerous element of Treuer's argument is that he wants to prevent writers like Alexie and Erdrich from claiming authenticity. In essence, Treuer is reserving to himself the right to decide who may contribute to the culture, the right to decide who is authentic in the name of preserving his "cultural patrimony" and to do so he's willing to. It's a tempting argument. But to do so is cultural suicide.

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