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Arnold Krupat, "*That the People Might Live.*" *Loss and Renewal in Native American Elegy*

Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2012

Lionel Larré

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REFERENCES

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- 1 In his latest book, Arnold Krupat attempts to analyze a literary genre usually considered as a Western form of literature. Because elegy is meant to lament the loss of an individual, it has so far not been seen as fitting what Daniel Heath Justice called "the communitistic principles of indigenous nationhood" (Acoose *et al.*, 2008, 153). Yet, Krupat argues, "traditional, oral elegiac performance offers consolation to the community so that it may recover and flourish" (4), so "that the People might live" on. If one considers that the land is an essential part of the community for Indigenous people, and that consequently, in Vine Deloria Jr.'s words, Indigenous people have been in exile since European colonization, even when they were not actually removed from their ancestral lands (261), then Native Americans mourn many different kinds of loss: "Land loss and ceremonial loss," but also "language loss, culture loss; loss of the young to the Indian boarding schools, and, later, to drugs, alcohol, and suicide" (7). Thus, Native American expression often takes on an elegiac tone, which is "strongly oriented towards the community rather than the individual" (9), a characteristic expressed by the title of a book by Jace Weaver, from which Krupat borrows for his own title, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (1997).

- 2 Krupat starts his analysis with oral performances from the past and continues studying an "elegiac expression" (4) in more recent, written Native American literature. After an introduction, Krupat divides his work in four chapters. The first two focus on oral performances, the third on written literature from the 19th century mainly, and the fourth on prose and poetry by authors from the "Native American Renaissance" onward. One of the merits of Krupat's work is that it considers worthy of literary attention performances that precede the first written manifestations of Native American expressions at the end of the 18th century. It is also a difficulty, as the only traces of these oral performances that are left for us to examine are necessarily transcriptions. As such, they inevitably cast doubts on their authenticity. More or less convincingly, Krupat painstakingly endeavors to assess the authenticity of each expression he chooses to study.
- 3 In his first chapter, Krupat examines the Iroquois condolence rites, the Tlingit *koo.'eex'*, or "potlatch"—that is to say an essential performance in Tlingit ceremonial life "for spiritual healing and removal of grief" (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1990, xi, quoted in Krupat, 29)—as well as some Ghost Dance songs recorded by anthropologist James Mooney.
- 4 In his second chapter, Krupat chooses to examine speeches by famous Native American leaders Logan (1774), Black Hawk (1832), Chief Sealth (or Seattle; 1854 or 1855), Cochise (1871-1872) and Chief Joseph (1877). In an annex, the reader will find the transcriptions of these speeches, sometimes several versions of them, which is very useful as these can be considered the most authoritative versions of performances which have otherwise often been mutilated to fit what popular audiences wished to find while searching for either the proof that the Native American was vanishing indeed, or what one may call a quintessential Native American wisdom. If this chapter is beyond reproach as far as literary archeology is concerned, it is not always extremely convincing as an assessment of Native American elegy. This is not the author's fault, though. These texts are bound to raise suspicion, as they are translated transcriptions of oral speeches in Native American languages, sometimes pronounced in front of a very limited white audience (Black Hawk and Cochise, for example gave their "surrender speeches" in front of the military victors), and which were often published many years after their utterance, when some witness chose to publish what they remembered of what they heard. As Krupat puts it, they are "original, bicultural, composite compositions produced at the urging of whites in the ideological service of progressive expansionism" (61). Krupat readily admits that these speeches often take on an elegiac tone because their European and American audiences appreciated strong leaders "bidding the world farewell as they embrace an undesired but apparently inevitable exile or demise" (60). Rather than studying how these performances were elegies, Krupat's work, in this chapter, rather consists in examining why they may not have been for their authors as elegiac as their audiences wished them to be. The following quote about the speech attributed to Chief Joseph illustrates the conundrum confronted by Krupat: "It is, as I have said, possible that Joseph did speak some version of these few words to General Miles—Aoki (1989) mentions eyewitnesses other than Miles who claimed to have heard Joseph speak briefly, as he himself had (apparently) affirmed—and that Chapman had translated these words in 1877 and again in 1879. Even so, there is not much one can say about them as elegiac expression" (104).

- 5 In Chapter 3, Krupat examines Black Hawk's autobiography (1833), *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), William Apress's *Eulogy on King Philip* (1836), and some of the poetry by Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (1800-1842) and John Rollin Ridge (1827-1867), among others. Some of these works, such as Schoolcraft's, are written by converted Indians and fit in a tradition of Christian Western elegy rather than a specifically Native American trend (127). Nevertheless, as far as Black Hawk and Black Elk are concerned, two authors of autobiographies which have been translated from their Native languages and transcribed into written forms by European and American mediators, Krupat argues that, although they have long been read as examples of Western elegies, they fit more adequately a Native American sense of elegy as they seek to "enact by narrative means the continuance and survivance" of the people (16). With these texts, Krupat faced the same difficulties as with the oral performances he examined in the second chapter. Sometimes, he clearly identifies elegiac passages that are not by the Indian authors, but rather additions, or interpretations, by their European and American mediators (115). However, as has been shown before by Krupat himself in previous works or other scholars of Native American autobiographies, these texts are narrative means for the People to "move beyond defeat and loss. In the manner of Native American elegiac expression generally, to tell of these things is not finally to mourn and consign them to the past, but rather to keep them alive, so the People might live" (116).
- 6 In his last chapter, Krupat examines prose works by better-known authors such as N. Scott Momaday, Linda Hogan and Gerald Vizenor, and a variety of poetry by Wendy Rose, Jimmie Durham, Simon Ortiz, Maurice Kenny and Kimberly Blaeser, among others. These 20th century works do not pose the problems of questionable authorship that Krupat had to navigate through in the previous three chapters. Some of these works are also very familiar to this book's potential readers, although they may not have necessarily been read as elegies. However, Arnold Krupat includes lesser-known authors who deserve closer attention.
- 7 In the end, *"That the People Might Live": Loss and Renewal in Native American Elegy* is a panorama of Native American literature that any student of the latter should find very useful.

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INDEX

Subjects: Recensions

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