

ETHNIC LITERATURE

Contemporary American literature is remarkable in its diversity and in portraying a variety of experiences. Today's diversity has its roots in the 1960s, when the Civil Rights movement began to change American society and therefore American culture.

Before the 1960s, the question for ethnic and minority writers had been: how they might fit themselves *into* mainstream culture. Later on, during the process of pluralizing American culture, the question was: how alternative centres of culture, alternative understandings of its nature and functions might be established *by* minority writers *for* minority communities. Ethnic writers increasingly responded to the imperative to speak for themselves. They had to define their own distinctive voices, create their own artistic forms and critical discourses, develop their own institutions (esp. publishing houses).

Basic models for ethnic literature:

- assimilation: writers trying to embrace Anglo-American values, trying to make a passage from the margin to the mainstream
- opposition to mainstream tradition: stressing the difference; construction of ethnic minority as a separate cohesive group; showing constant struggle between the ethnic group and the mainstream; there is very close relationship between literary creation and political movement
- multiethnicity: authors are combining all trends and values they see around themselves

Native American writers

Native Americans valued highly the oratorical skills by which tribal traditions could be transmitted. Oral transmissions resembled dramatic performances: because in addition to speaking, a narrator enacted scenes, sometimes adopting different voices and gestures for different characters, or moving around within certain area in order to reflect particular places and times. Native Americans had also different ideas of authorship. Some stories and songs were considered common property, while others were the property of a particular social or religious group, and still others belonged to individuals.

Types of oral narratives and poetry: origin and emergence stories (tribal explanations of the origin of the earth and its people), culture hero stories (about how a remarkable individual altered the original world and social order into its culturally accepted form), historical narratives (explain the movements of the tribes, usually featuring Indian legendary figures), trickster tales (humorous stories about trickster characters who violate the established customs and values of the tribe), ritual poetry

Early Native American literary production in English (19th century) indicates the degree of acculturation of the tribes and reflects the impact of removal (The Removal Act of 1830 enabled to move Native Americans west of the Mississippi) and other assimilationist policies, such as Christian education, upon them. Most Native Americans who wrote in English were forced to acculturate in order to survive. Some Native Americans attempted the oral traditions of their people. In this period Indians also started to produce literature of social protest, usually in the form of public speeches.

Native American literature (and other ethnic literature as well) made its first wide impact on general readership in the late 1960s, which led to the flourishing of Indian writers in the 1970s and 1980s. **Louise Erdrich** (novels *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*), **Leslie Marmon Silko** (novel *Ceremony*), **N. Scott Momaday** (novel *House Made of Dawn*), **Sherman Alexie** (collection of short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*)

Hispanic American writers

Spanish influenced literature encompasses works by many diverse groups: Mexican-Americans (known as Chicanos), Cuban-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other immigrants from Central and South America. These writers often combine Spanish with English, which should indicate bilingualism of their culture. In their works you can find a strong sense for family and community.

Representatives: **Sandra Cisneros**, **Christina Garcia**, **Lorna Dee Cervantes** (poet)

Asian American writers

Asians were among the latest and least welcome immigrants to the United States. They expressed in their writing a sense of alienation, because they entered the country with certain expectations, and soon found out how false their expectations were. **Amy Tan** (novel *The Joy Luck Club*), **Maxine Hong Kingston** (novel *The Woman Warrior*)

Sources:

Lauter, Paul (ed.). The Heath Anthology of American Literature. Volume 2. Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1994