

maintain the racist and sexist status quo," then Renee Hulan's new anthology, *Native North America*, is a most welcome and necessary tool of this liberatory practice and should be a required text on university English courses in this country, in the United States and abroad.

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

Review by Laura Murray, English Department, Queen's University

Karl Kroeber has produced an odd book. On the one hand, this is an anthology, in which thematic groupings of Native stories are followed by critical essays—one might, then, suppose that it would be appropriate for a general readership or classroom use. After all, Native stories are not transparent in meaning, and there would be a place for a collection that, unlike Erdoes and Ortiz's widely known *American Indian Myths and Legends*, offered clarification and cultural context for the material it presents. Kroeber has selected some fine stories: tellers range from the laconic Jack of Murek to the literary James Welch, and transcriptions represent both 19th-century and "state-of-the-art" approaches (Canadian content is the Beaver story "The Girl and her Younger Brother," told by Antoine Hunter and translated by Robin Ridington). Kroeber clusters complementary tellings of bear stories, trickster stories, Yurok blood money stories, Blackfoot Feather Woman stories and Lakota Stone Boy stories. However, Kroeber's commentaries are mostly preoccupied with larger critical concerns of his own, and he only eventually directly engages with the stories themselves: as the title suggests, this is really a monograph, with stories included for handy reference. The most extreme case is the first section, in which the Iroquois story of Tekanawita and the cannibal is followed by a critique of Tristram P. Coffin's 1961 *Indian Tales of North America*, an examination of the anthropology exhibits at the 1893 Chicago Exposition, and a defence of American, as opposed to French, anthropology. Kroeber's parents were, of course, illustrious Boasian anthropologists, and he seems here more con-

cerned with defending the family name than illuminating Iroquois mythology—although it must be said that his discussion of the Americanizing function of the study of Native Americans for a generation of immigrant anthropologists is very interesting. Kroeber's claim that his own anthology is "radically different" from Coffin's, since Coffin was "unable to develop a valid intuition of the difference between Western written literature and Indian oral narratives" is risky, since it provokes a reader of Kroeber's book to test him on this question. And unfortunately, it is not at all clear that Kroeber passes.

Kroeber argues that there is an essential difference between the mythic imagination and the literary imagination. He proposes that Native American myths, rather than being static pillars of a static culture as they have often been thought to be, "are told in order to be retold." That is to say, they are essentially variable, and it is in this variability that allows them to continue to produce meaning for a changing culture—whereas Western written artworks are designed to produce particular effects. Non-Native readers or listeners, he notes, not familiar enough with the nuances of the stories, see only overt repetition and are blind to variations and intentional ambiguities crafted by individual tellers. "Studies of oral practices in our [Western] culture tend to mislead, because all our discourse is significantly contaminated by literacy," Kroeber writes. "Indian cultures exist through the fashion in which every part of their world is both the object and the inspiration of continual imagining and reimagining." Now, Kroeber is definitely onto something. When I teach traditional Native stories, non-Native students often balk at the apparent lack of causal relationships, of moral clarity, of "take-home message." So, for example, after reading the Lakota Stone Boy stories Kroeber includes, they (and I) might ask, Why does the old woman kill men by inviting them to kick her? Why does the boy kill the girls while sledding down the hill? What are we supposed to think about these apparently unmotivated violent events? And so on. Kroeber makes the important claim that Native stories are told in an open way to permit cultural and individual adaptations, and to make audiences work out moral and aesthetic issues on their own. But it seems to me that his categorical distinction between oral and literate, Native and

non-Native cultures, just doesn't hold. I should say that I don't rule out the possibility that there *isn't* some essential difference between these modes and cultures—but Kroeber doesn't get at it here. "Mythic" stories in Western culture are open-ended too. Consider the story from Genesis of Jacob and Esau. Jacob only gives his hungry older brother food under the condition that Esau give up his birthright, and when their blind father lies dying Jacob represents himself as Esau to receive his blessing—and yet neither God nor Old Testament passes judgment on Jacob. When I present the story to students, those who have been raised as Christians say, oh well, Esau was lazy and so he deserved it: the story is about how you have to earn your birthright. Students who have not been raised as Christians, think Jacob is a sneak and a liar. I tell them about another valence the story has often borne: Esau, the "red" and "hairy" man, has been viewed as a figure for the "savage" who won't farm and expects handouts. My point here is that meaning accrues around stories, not just between their lines. The story of Esau and Jacob, too, has many meanings, and which we privilege has most to do with where and who we are. In the case of Native stories, it would be entirely arrogant of latter-day non-Native readers to presume that the meaning they construct when they confront the story on the page is as valid as that of a more informed or "insider" reader. But to deny their own responses is perverse as well, and can amount to a refusal to participate in the open interpretive economy Kroeber identifies. A non-Native reader (or a Native reader from a different time or nation) can never come up with an insider reading, but they can try to stitch together their own responses, the story itself, other versions of it (here I agree with Kroeber) and the responses of more informed interpreters. The cultural differences Kroeber is concerned with are both larger than he thinks and smaller than he thinks. Larger than he thinks, because open-mindedness and facts won't bridge them: Kroeber's one-to-three-paragraph ethnographic and historical footnotes on the culture from which each story comes are almost laughably inadequate as foundations for interpretation. Smaller than he thinks, because many of Kroeber's observations about myth and meaning apply to non-Native cultures. Furthermore, his polarized sense of the



difference between oral and literate cultures doesn't address the situation today in which Native writers Gerald Vizenor, Betty Bell, James Welch, Maria Campbell, and so on and so on, are "contaminated" (to use Kroeber's word) by literacy, but tell stories nonetheless in breath and ink.

Kroeber is primarily known as a scholar of late-18th-century British romantic poets. It would be a bit crude but not totally wrong, I think, to suggest that he admires Native Americans as the only ones who have ever really implemented Percy Shelley's ideas about the essential role of art in keeping the world running (Shelley does come up in his discussion of the function of the mythic imagination). For Shelley, art was both transcendent and instrumental. Kroeber wants to protect Native American myth, as an embodiment of art and culture so conceived, from the "vapour trails of high-flying theoreticians," from contamination. But sometimes those theoreticians are Native Americans, showing once again the adaptability of myth Kroeber himself celebrates: Kroeber's protective aim is impossible, but could it be achieved it would be paralyzing according to his own claims. Kroeber's fascination with the voice as inherently more poetic than the written word sounds like Wordsworth, and Kroeber suffers the same contradictions as Wordsworth, who was, after all, a writer of poems. Of course, this isn't bad company, and I don't for a minute doubt Kroeber's sincere interest and appreciation for Native stories and traditions. Some of his local insights are telling, and his reading of Bad Wound's Stone Boy story, for example, is very rich. However, teachers or story-learners who want to think about Native stories in action would do better to look first at Julie Cruikshank's *Life Lived Like a Story* or Greg Sarris's *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, brilliant books both.

Jean L. Manore. *Cross-Currents: Hydroelectricity and the Engineering of Northern Ontario*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999.

Review by Martin Loney

The generation of hydroelectric power was central to the develop-