GUEST EDITORIAL
Listening in on the Struggle for the New World

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(This Guest Editorial first appeared in 1990)

For five hundred years, American Indian, European, African, and Asian peoples have battled for the right to define the New World. Battle, indeed, for people are dying today, and the benign domestic image of the stewpot and all of us "melting" into homogeneity hardly fits the violence and terror of the struggle. The symbolic battle is fought partly with the voices of ordinary people. Listening in on the quiet talk of American Indian people is one clue to the mighty processes by which human beings forge new ways of being, processes that have been thrown into high relief by the epic of conquest and resistance, colonization and revolution, that is the living history of the Americas.

On the territory they've staked out on the great post-Columbian battlefield, American Indians remain diverse, full of surprises, yet continually and undeniably distinct from what their intellectuals call "occidental." Their self-making is often conducted in extraordinary material poverty and confusion. The big Tohonno O'odham reservation where I've been working has all the usual reservation problems: hot sun and dust, not enough money, too much liquor, and political scandals that might bring a blush to the cheek of an old-time Chicago alderman. Dr. Ofelia Zepeda (an O'odham poet and linguist) and I have been doing a dialect survey of the reservation. From the survey I remember most an old man who lives in a fly-blown village maybe one hundred miles west of Tucson. Inside his little adobe house, a wardrobe of well-worn flowered cowboy shirts hung from the ceiling, an old coffee pot on a battered TV tray and a hanging light bulb were hooked up to the main house by a very long orange utility extension cord, the furniture was mainly old car seats, and the dirt floor was made cozy with about two dozen carpet samples in a variety of weaves and colors. I perched on the old man's little cot, and Ofelia found a place on an old sofa that didn't have too many springs coming up or cowboy shirts hanging down. We then taped our interview, along with a lot of winter wind and a couple of memorable sonic booms. The tone of the place was what the postmodern theoreticians call *pastiche.* You'd think there was no proper culture there at all, just a sort of random accumulation of the debris of civilization that got caught going down the drain with the Indians.

But you'd be wrong. The old man was a great shaman. It's a mystery why he gave us two hours, because for a consultation on a serious matter, he commanded a fee that would not disgrace a good neurosurgeon. At night, with clients sitting on the car seats under the cowboy shirts, he can sing his way along the flowery paths that Elder Brother Shaman marked between the cracks of time, soothing the animal spirits that, disturbed by human foolishness, make O'odham people ill, and doing battle with black sorcerers who might sicken a baby for a taste of its innocence. He lives out back in a little house partly to avoid distractions, so he can focus his power, but partly so his family won't be harmed in case some evil force gets loose as he works.

The old man doesn't speak much English; he doesn't need to, because the animal spirits and the sorcerers speak O'odham, in exquisite poetry. So curing and blessing, the tasks of the wise and elderly, are centers of creation in the language. But life isn't all being sick, so good announcers kid around in O'odham over the public address system at the powwow and the rodeo, and grandparents lecture kids when they get out of line, and old ladies get on the new telephone system to round up hot dishes for potlucks. They use English too, to put a citified spin on a joke, or give a little bureaucratic solidity to a meeting, and they're afraid that young people speak English too much. But O'odham English has a special quietness and courtesy to it, and O'odham itself is showing up in new places and shapes. The hardworking staff of the bilingual education program is producing alphabet books, and counting books, and cookbooks, and nature stories, and biographies about O'odham people who had especially worthwhile lives. Children, and young men and women (and even the odd white enthusiast) are composing new kinds of O'odham poetry, and writing it down, claiming their desert—the noble nurturing saguaros, and the Old Woman Sitting Mountain, and the toe-tapping dance music—with "O'odham thoughts."

In Mexico, for ten years, I've listened in on the continuing creation, through a synthesis of Spanish and what linguists call "Nahuat", of a way of speaking called Mexicano. Speakers claim thereby a unique and privileged citizenship in a modern state, Mexico, which through its very name claims their heritage yet denies that they are proper exemplars of the national identity. Here one sees a picturesque sort of material ruin that gives little clue to the stubborn indigenous presence indexed in the kitchen talk of women, despised and beneath the notice of the national myth makers. Listening to it, catching the proportion of this kind of root and that, one learns who people think they are, and there they lie along the battle lines.

The study of American Indian languages is done these days more and more by linguists who are native speakers; their unique intuitions cannot be duplicated. However, I've had the privilege of listening to the murmur of the voices that, even when the clash of arms is briefly quiet, constitutes the soft background radiation of the creation of the history of human beings.