

ARNOLD KRUPAT, *“That the People Might Live”: Loss and Renewal in Native American Elegy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2012), 242pp.

Arnold Krupat, an authority in Native American autobiography, applies his analytical acumen to several different genres in his most recent book, reading widely in a tradition that he himself has helped to canonize. His insights are pithy—the main text runs only 170 pages—and will serve as jumping-off points for future scholars, one hopes, rather than as the definitive readings of an evocative selection of texts. Krupat is less interested in literary themes or figures of speech than in what “genres [...] behaviorally [...] do or functionally seek to bring about” (13; emphasis in orig.). Genres, in his definition, which is worth citing at length, must accomplish certain psychological, ritual, and religious ends: “to help bring about the appropriate ‘feeding,’ placating or ‘releasing’ the spirits of the dead, aiding their journey to the spirit land, commemorating or, indeed, helping the living to forget them. They also [...] function to console the living, raise their spirits, and restore healthy communal relations, that the People [a collective of Native Americans] might live” (13).

Only when they fulfill these functions does Krupat consider (most of) the examined performances, ceremonies, speeches, autobiographies, and poems as ‘elegies.’ Although he refers to other important literary studies of the elegiac form (by Peter Sacks, Jahan Ramazani, and Max Cavitch) and thoughtfully engages Freud’s ideas of mourning and melancholia, this behavioral interpretation short-changes the Western tradition, which also defines elegies psychologically—they are “to praise, lament, and console”—both with regards to the deceased and the bereaved.<sup>1</sup> This matters because the European and Native elegy are thus more alike than Krupat thinks, in that they both contain programs for communal emotions, and Native expression thus need not (necessarily) be considered in a rarified realm of its own. Instead, Indian elegy could have benefitted from a consideration that charts its engagement(s) with white ways of textual mourning: for instance, the very first piece of poetry published by a Native Ameri-

can was an elegy in Latin and ancient Greek for Thomas Tacher, a Puritan minister, by a Harvard student known as Eleazar. Now, the mere mention of this poem is relegated to an endnote (n. 39, p. 206), which appears—probably through no fault of Krupat’s—in nearly illegibly small font.

However, there are many other things to love about this book, among them Krupat’s deft handling of ideas such as exile and Freud’s notion of melancholia. “Exile,” writes Krupat, should be seen as “a disruption in the enabling conditions of [a tribal nation’s] ongoing ceremonial and ritual life” (7)—a definition which makes this concept pertain, in a unique way, to the Native American predicament. Melancholia, unlike mourning, refuses closure and can inspire “a creative process” aimed precisely at reinvigorating (pun intended) a Native tribe’s ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> Although Krupat aims to launch a theory, rather than a law (cf. 9), of Native elegy, the theory sounds more flexible than the practice proves. For, ultimately, Krupat is the judge of what exactly elegiac gestures seek to accomplish and whether or not they succeed. He claims that authority by painstakingly historicizing and contextualizing the utterance under review. For example, in chapter three, Krupat looks at *Black Hawk’s Life* (1833), arguing that because it speaks at length about “what it means to be a Sauk”—an identity that has been lost—the book is “a form of narrative symbolic action functioning in the interest of its [the identity’s] recovery” and therefore elegiac (111-12). But we learn little about *Black Hawk’s Life* or Sauk history: instead, Krupat catalogues different possible prophets from the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Creek, Kickapoo, and Ottawa nations that Black Hawk may have heard. This list brings both Krupat’s argumentation and narrative to a standstill and makes his claim seem far-fetched or simply unproven. In a remarkable caveat, Krupat acknowledges that I am not the first reader to stumble over these lengthy contextualizations, writing that “both readers of the manuscript of this book for Cornell University Press urged me to be careful to not let this [historical and cultural] material overwhelm the literary analysis, and I have tried to heed their advice” (17). On this point he has not, I fear, succeeded.

<sup>1</sup> G.W. Pigman III, *Grief and the English Renaissance Elegy* (Cambridge, London: Cambridge UP, 1985): 41.

<sup>2</sup> Krupat takes this from David Eng and David Kazanjian, eds., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003): 3.

Nevertheless, this should not distract readers from Krupat's admirable scope and erudition. In particular, his readings of Native poetry in chapter three and four convincingly construct a coherent canon out of texts from very different times and places. Still, his selections and criticism remain somewhat haphazard: Louise Erdrich is rejected on the basis of her poetry, though surely her novels (none of which are treated) are acutely concerned with the preservation of Native American traditions. And, while Krupat provides careful close-readings of Adrian Louis and Paula Gunn Allen, he casually passes by Kimberly Blaeser. Sometimes citation stands instead

of interpretation or really any kind of critical engagement with the text, and Krupat continually returns to the phrase "that the People might live," which therefore takes on an aura of wishful incantation, rather than serving as a capstone to solid analysis. Ultimately, I do not think Krupat intended to write a study that rigidly adheres to standards of literary argumentation. Instead, his readings work more impressionistically, conjuring a diverse, resilient tradition that, despite the death of so many of its contributors, lives on in manifold and powerful ways.

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