

Introduction: Cherokee Modern

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For the first time, *Transmotion* is dedicating its pages to the work of a single writer. Such dedicated issues used to be commonplace among academic journals with a cultural focus, but are now discouraged: indeed, some literary journals now state outright that they do not accept proposals for such a specific purpose. Undoubtedly there are some good reasons for such a policy. For instance, editors may feel that readers will be put off if they are not aware of or invested in the specific writer's work. Editors and publishers might also reasonably argue that special issues focussed on a philosophical question, an historical moment, or a branch of criticism serve to drive the field as a whole forward. Author-specific issues, in this telling, are at worst irrelevant and at best serve only the sort of canonisation that has proved toxic in Native American literary studies when it results in the same handful of writers being taught on every freshman course, and a small coterie of writers becoming seen as representative.

Yet, at their best, author-specific issues and collections also serve in their own way to drive debates. By allowing for a broad range of approaches to the subject at hand, they bring those approaches into conversation and serve as proof of concept for critical approaches to literatures. They also serve to deepen the general understanding of a writer by pushing readers into thinking through multiple approaches to their work. (I remember, for instance, a special issue on the work of Gerald Vizenor edited by Rodney Simard, now nearly three decades old, and the impact that reading an article on Vizenor's relationship with legal discourse had on my understanding of that writer). And while it is true that an overly narrow focus on a few writers might obscure the wealth of writing that is out there, a focus on a less well-known writer can have entirely

the opposite result. All of which is to say that my co-editor A. Robert Lee and myself hope that this issue will inspire others to approach this journal with other ideas for single author issues focussed on neglected writers. And the writer that is the focus of this entire issue, Ralph Salisbury, has undoubtedly not received his critical due.

I wished my words were bullets
when students intent
in keeping "colored" out
of public toilets and employment
and from between white thighs
made threatening
to drive "one Niggerloving Cherokee Damyantee"
out of town their ultimate argument
in Beginning Logic.

- Ralph Salisbury, "Feeling Out of It" (*Light* 50)

Since some readers may not be fully familiar with Ralph Salisbury's work, some introduction is in order. The career begins with the poem "In the Children's Museum in Nashville," published in *The New Yorker* in 1961. This was a significant breakthrough for a writer placing Indigenous concerns squarely at the heart of his writing, and places him alongside Pauline Johnson, Lynn Riggs or Zitkála-Šá as writers who reached beyond an audience primarily interested in Native themes, well before various media events of the late '60's served to boost an entire generation. Ever since that time and until his death in 2017, Salisbury's voice was raised against racism, injustice, environmental destruction, the nuclear arms race and wars of all stripes. This mission is visible across his eleven collections of poetry, three of short stories, a memoir and, less

directly, in translations of Sámi poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, as well as in his service as a long-term editor of the *Northwest Review* and a mentor to many younger writers at the University of Oregon.

In his poetry, Salisbury has a genius at interleaving images in his poems, such as in the poem "Castration of the Herd-Boar Recollected Without Tranquillity, after Nagasaki," where the speaker's thoughts flicker between the memory of a morning on the farm, and the horrors committed by the US army in Asia: "our herd-board struck earth, a three hundred pound bomb's / explosions of dust becoming mud on my tongue" (*Light* 130). Indeed, much of his writing has the quality of a palimpsest, in which memories and reflections constantly change perceptions of the quotidian and everyday, haunted by the poet's knowledge of violence. In "American Suburb, War in Iraq", the handlebars of hastily discarded boys' bicycles become the horns of stags locked in conflict, reminding the speaker of the deaths that are occurring in the US invasion of Iraq, half way around the planet. Though the writing always has a clearly left-liberal bent, there is a complexity of interwoven consciousness and conscience that allows it to escape from any sort of programmatic quality, even when the poems deal directly with war, suffering and capitalism.

And there is also the fact that Salisbury's liberalism and rejection of violence is very far from being elitist or class-based. His hardscrabble rural childhood was, after all, spent in poverty in Iowa, in a family dominated by an alcoholic father unafraid to mete out violence to those weaker than him. In his memoir, *So Far, So Good* (2013), Salisbury sees himself and his eight-year-old brother in a photograph, where they "look like children in Prevent World Hunger posters, not near death from starvation but emaciated from hunger" (92). Later on the same page, he recalls a time when "my drunken father shot at or near my defiant mother," a time in which the nine or ten year

old Ralph had to talk his own father out of murdering his mother. This incident that recurs often in the poetry:

Bullets which splintered floor close to my toes
when I was four and again as I cringed
up to the gun to beg for my mother's life when I was ten
hit home after my father, grown old and gentle, grew too old.
("Elegy for a Father/Friend," *Light* 168).

As the final line here shows, the relationship softened over time, as the elder Salisbury became a doting grandfather. Much of Salisbury's work is inflected with this possibility of redemption, a lesson learned from the contrast between the happiness he felt as a child and his later comprehension of the violence and desperation in the adult world around him at that time. Equally, his belief in the potential of the State to effect goodness grew from his family's benefitting from the New Deal, while his frequent imagery of bullets, bombs and shrapnel is rooted in a military service during which he only barely avoided active combat between the end of World War II and the draft for Korea.

Much of his writing is also taken up with his consciousness of himself as Cherokee, the descendant of survivors of genocide, and the concomitant need to resist the Euro-American Imperium in all its guises. This self-identification as Cherokee may not sit well with everyone who works in Indigenous Studies, since Salisbury did not take up citizenship in either the Cherokee nor the Shawnee nations, was not close to a specific Native community, and was not aware of his ancestry until already into adulthood. Like N. Scott Momaday's mother Natachee, who had to "[begin] to see herself as Indian" (25), Salisbury identified much more strongly with his Cherokee

ancestry than was common among many people who have a family story of Indian ancestors. In his memoir, he records how this identification underpinned both his anti-racism and his nascent ecological consciousness, while in his poetry one finds frequent reference to Cherokee religious insight and knowledge. Most if not all of this must have come from books – James Mooney makes several appearances – and it is true that one would not study Salisbury for an authentic insider account of Cherokee community. Rather, the power of the poetry comes from hard work at craft, fuelled by a sense of responsibility to his Cherokee ancestors and to a cosmopolitan sense of being an Indigenous citizen of the world.

A Robert Lee begins this issue with a detailed overview of what he terms Ralph Salisbury's "writing-in," that ever inward circling into selfhood that concerns so much of the poet's memoristic work. He is followed up by Eleanor Berry, who in an act of close reading takes on Salisbury's experiments with syntax, demonstrating how the games these allow him to play with time and conscience allow him to create a complex, deeply ethical core to his vision. Next, Miriam Brown Spiers does due justice to the war experiences that so deeply shaped the writer, and the ways that Salisbury's war stories reveal a deep communitism in the work. Crystal Alberts, in a consideration of the earlier poetry, explores multiple resonances with and possible influences from the work of César Vallejo, including the "leaping" of images. Finally, but certainly not least among the peer-reviewed articles, Cathy Covell Waegner brings a transnational focus to the study of this "Indigenous humanist," examining the relationship Salisbury forged from his connections with Germany, the country he had been trained to bomb.

It has always been our intention in putting together such a collection that it would inspire others to further study of Ralph Salisbury. To that end, we are particularly happy to have been able to work with his life partner, Ingrid Wendt, no mean poet herself, to produce a brace of contributions that will prove significant resources for

further scholarship. The first, appearing in our "Reflections" series, is entitled "The Vetruvian Man and Beyond," and it provides an intimate, learned discussion of poetry and spirituality. The second, an interview with A. Robert Lee, is an informative and fascinating inside look at a life well lived. Finally, the issue finishes with a sampler of Ralph Salisbury's poems for readers who have not yet had the pleasure of reading his work.

This issue also brings some changes in *Transmotion*. We are delighted to welcome Bryn Skibo-Birney onto the permanent team, where she will be taking over from James Mackay as the main book reviews editor. Bryn has been working with us for two years already on academic book reviews, and we're really delighted that she agreed to take on this further challenge. Another new arrival is Matt Kliewer of the University of Georgia, who will be working to improve our coverage of new Indigenous poetry in the book reviews section.

As regular readers may have noticed, we have also changed the font in which the journal is produced. The new font, Avenir Book, is a sans serif typeface that will hopefully improve your reading experience.

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