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## *Harrington: A Reply to Heizer*

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The Winter 1975 issue of the *Journal of California Anthropology* is exceptional in this sense: three of the four major divisions of the *Journal* (Articles, Comment, Reviews) contain a piece devoted almost exclusively to one man—John Peabody Harrington. In addition, the poem was written by a woman whom many in both the linguistic/anthropological community and among the general public associate, for obvious reasons, with the same man. The authors of five other pieces (King, Applegate, Blackburn, Bright, and Anderson) use data collected by the same man. It is also safe to assume, I think, that future issues of the *Journal of California Anthropology* will contain articles whose analyses and conclusions are based partially or wholly upon Harrington's materials.

Each of the three pieces on Harrington himself gives us a different view of the man:

Callaghan: "Under the circumstances, the only person who could accurately preserve large numbers of exotic languages would be someone who was physically robust and willing to devote 18 hours a day to data collection, and who cared so little for academic prestige that he would not spend the time necessary to prepare his material for publication. In addition, he would have to find an institution that would support him. Americanists can thank the gods for providing them with such an impossible combination in the person of John Peabody Harrington" (p. 183).

Elsasser: "Carobeth Laird's account of her life with ethnologist/linguist John P. Harrington can hardly be called a backdrop to anything . . . , [it] does, however, provide some understanding of Harrington's life in relation to his work. For instance, it makes clear why such a brilliant and zealous scholar as he had so few formal publications despite the tremendous numbers of notes and manuscripts he collected on both ethnology and linguistics" (p. 239).

Heizer: "I do not think Harrington was a genius, but rather that he was highly intelligent, obviously devoted to his work, and surely erratic . . . . Harrington wrote some first-rate things, but he never demonstrated in print the heavenly flash of vaticinal projection which characterizes the insight of a genius" (p. 233).

Anyone who has used Harrington's materials to try to piece together a usable and realistic picture of the language or culture of an extinct California group can appreciate Callaghan's sympathetic view. I have worked with several Chumashan dialects: Obispeño, Purisimeño, and Island Chumash in the most depth. Despite the frustration I sometimes felt about the abbreviations and idiosyncracies of handwriting or recording techniques, it was obvious that without Harrington's information on these idioms, we would know very little about the character of the Chumashan family as a whole, and would be unable to reconstruct a proto-language at all. Earlier attempts at reconstruction using other materials (the manuscript of Father Felipe Arroyo de la Cuesta in the Bancroft Library, or the Henshaw and Pinart records edited by Heizer), and undertaken by exceptionally competent California specialists, were totally unsuccess-

ful. For a broad picture of Chumashan, we have Harrington to thank.

Elsasser's piece, although technically a review of Mrs. Laird's book, helps place Harrington's personal life into its proper perspective with regard to his professional career. This, too, is a valuable comment on a man whose impact is not yet assessable since no one is even certain of the total extent of the work.

The third piece, though, by Heizer, is a puzzling one. In tone it is a bitter piece. Harrington's work is, in the first sentence, put into the same category as Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (as if that had anything to do with the subject at hand: Tom Wolfe's name and thus his reputation, and his description of Harrington as a "genius anthropologist" are used on the dust cover of *Encounter With An Angry God* to sell books). The most specific memory of Harrington that Heizer cares to recall for us is the following trivial incident: "I recall specifically his spending an hour or so showing me the details of a huge typewriter which he had devised with keys for both English and Cyrillic letters. Harrington seemed to think that this would represent a big breakthrough in linguistics (pp. 233-234). Heizer's final comment on Harrington himself is most telling: "In my opinion, Harrington was an able linguist, and he had the potential of contributing importantly to California ethnography, but he did not realize this because he was so screwed up" (p. 234).

Heizer makes an interesting comparison between the currently unpublished notes of Harrington and the posthumously published notes (edited by Heizer himself) of C. Hart Merriam (not all of Merriam's data are, in fact, published). Merriam apparently does not rate the kind of criticism Harrington does—despite the fact that Merriam himself was reclusive, secretive about his informants, and published little linguistic or ethnographic information in his lifetime. Besides this, Merriam did not even use anything approaching a standard system of

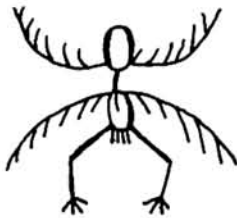
phonetic transcription, but rather one based roughly on the notoriously inconsistent spelling of English. For all these "faults," Merriam is nonetheless a valuable source of information on dialects even Harrington did not record (Alliklik Chumash, for example). Heizer, quite rightly, does not criticize Merriam for all this, but has instead devoted considerable time to making his materials available. We can regret that he has not done the same for those of Harrington's materials which fall within his areas of interest.

Heizer, in my view, has presented us with essentially no new information on Harrington—he has not given us a different perspective, although that seems to be his intention. He says, "There is a tendency to equate idiosyncrasy and paranoia, when it is combined with brilliance, with genius. I do not think Harrington was a genius" (p. 233). We all know that Harrington and Kroeber did not get along; that Harrington was erratic, eccentric, or whatever else one chooses to call it; that he published little and rarely consulted with other scholars. His English-Cyrillic typewriter is even no big secret. It is puzzling to me why a man of such outstanding reputation and scholarly ability as Heizer should feel the need to write so bitterly about one whose work, while not necessarily done under "standard" or "approved" collection conditions, has nonetheless allowed us to understand more deeply many long-extinct groups than we ever thought possible, and has even in some cases provided information on totally unknown groups. If Heizer is to judge the value of Harrington's work on the basis of his personal idiosyncrasies, then Heizer must be willing to judge his own or Merriam's or any scholar's work on the same basis. The fact that Harrington did not publish more (for whatever personal reasons) or consult frequently with other scholars is to be regretted, but there is nothing we can do about it. Instead, we can only take what we have and be grateful for it.

My own interest in California Indian

languages began as a result of being hired as a research assistant to copy and sort some of Harrington's notes; the same is true of several other young California specialists I know. All of us have wondered many times about this man whose career has—literally over his dead body—been a major motivating force in our own careers. I do not consider Harrington a “genius” in the sense of “idiosyncratic” or “paranoic” or “erratic” alluded to by Heizer—a view which he seems to feel is the dominant one among the scholarly community; nor do my colleagues who have worked extensively with the Harrington manuscripts feel this way. We are not blindly worshipping that image of brilliance and eccentricity portrayed on the dust cover of *Encounter With An Angry God*: that image is meant to sell books to a more general audience, an audience who will never have any more contact with Harrington than that book. The rest of us, whose professional interest must make us grateful for whatever information we can have on groups like the Chumash, Salinan, Costanoan, Yokuts, and all the others Harrington worked with, have the man to thank. We can argue with his ethics, but to what avail unless it teaches us something about the ways in which scholarship is most (and least) productively accomplished? If that is the lesson of Heizer's piece, why teach it with bitterness?

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## *Comment on “A Note on Harrington and Kroeber”*

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Robert F. Heizer's note on Harrington and Kroeber (Winter, 1975) rightly deplores the tendency to equate eccentricity with genius and suggests that we reserve the latter word for those endowed with great creative insights. But my Winston dictionary also defines “genius” as “remarkable natural fitness for some special pursuit,” and in this sense, John P. Harrington was fully deserving of the term. Although he had little formal training in phonetics, he possessed an extraordinarily acute ear which enabled him to accurately record literally carloads of material on American Indian languages.

I became aware of this accuracy while sorting through his material at the Smithsonian Institution in 1962. I compared his Karok notes with William Bright's *The Karok Language* and found extremely close correspondence. Other linguists have given similar testimony.

Amerindianists whose research suffered because the Harrington material was unavailable may wish, along with Dr. Heizer, that he had published more of it during his lifetime. But his genius lay in data collection, not in publication. I found enough material in his archives to compile grammars and dictionaries of nearly a dozen now-extinct Coastal California languages alone. He would never have managed to rescue this large a number if he had taken the time to publish as he went along. His accurate transcriptions are now enabling others to complete the tedious process of systemizing the data.

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