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Lawrence and Native Americans

The chronology of Lawrence’s travels in the United States and Mexico between 1922 and 1925, and of the writing he did during this period, is very complicated. In this chapter I propose to follow a single strand: those texts, mostly essays, which offer themselves as direct representations of the author’s encounters with, and responses to, Native Americans. This chapter will therefore be the only one that is not centrally concerned with questions of narrative. Before discussing these texts, however, I want to place before the reader an outline of the more complicated biographical and textual history in which they are entwined.

Lawrence arrived in New Mexico in September 1922, from Australia, finally accomplishing the journey whose idea had preoccupied him at least since the war years, and which had been a concrete but frequently deferred plan since Mabel Dodge Sterne wrote inviting him nearly a year earlier. Within a few weeks of his arrival he wrote the essays ‘Indians and an Englishman’, ‘Taos’, ‘Certain Americans and an Englishman’ and the poem ‘The Red Wolf’, all of which represent aspects of his response to his first encounters with Native Americans. This is also a significant influence on the final version of Studies in Classic American Literature, which he also wrote during this period, drastically revising the earlier version.

Lawrence famously wrote in his essay ‘New Mexico’ that this place was ‘the greatest experience from the outside world that I have ever had. It certainly changed me for ever’, that ‘the moment I saw the brilliant, proud morning shine high up over the deserts of Santa Fé, something stood still in my soul’ (P 142), and most significantly that ‘I had no permanent feeling of religion till I came to New Mexico and penetrated into the old human race-experience there’ (P 144). But this essay was written in 1929, four years after Lawrence’s final departure.
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from New Mexico, and this impression of an immediate response is extremely misleading. In letters written during his first visit he wrote, ‘one’s heart is never touched at all—neither by landscape, Indians, or Americans’, and ‘the Indians are very american [sic]—no inside life’. 2 We shall see that in his more considered writings of the period he was much more engaged with Native American life than these letters suggest, but that he experienced considerable resistance to it.

From March to July 1923 Lawrence was in Mexico, first Mexico City then Chapala. During this period he wrote the first draft of *The Plumed Serpent*, now published as *Quetzalcoatl*—an achievement as remarkable as the composition of *Kangaroo* in a similarly short time the previous year. There followed a chaotic period in which Frieda returned to Europe alone, and Lawrence revisited Mexico with Kai Götzsche, who with Knud Merrild had spent the previous winter with the Lawrences on the Del Monte ranch near Taos. This second Mexican visit included the Sierra Madre, the setting for ‘The Woman Who Rode Away’, and during it Lawrence rewrote Molly Skinner’s ‘The House of Ellis’ as *The Boy in the Bush*.

After an unhappy return to Europe, Lawrence came back with Frieda to New Mexico in March 1924 and lived, first in Taos and then on the Kiowa Ranch, until October. It was in this period that all of his most celebrated writing about the American Southwest was produced, including ‘St Mawr’, ‘The Princess’, ‘The Woman Who Rode Away’ and the three essays about Native American ceremonials collected in *Mornings in Mexico*: ‘Indians and Entertainment’, ‘Dance of the Sprouting Corn’ and ‘The Hopi Snake Dance’. From October 1924 to March 1925 he made his third visit to Mexico, this time living mainly in Oaxaca, and working on the final draft of *The Plumed Serpent* and the four ‘Mexican’ sketches in *Mornings in Mexico* before collapsing with a serious illness. He spent several more months on the ranch, where he made final revisions to *The Plumed Serpent* and wrote some important essays and the play *David*, but nothing more about Native Americans. His engagement with the otherness of indigenous American culture had found its culminating expression in *The Plumed Serpent*.

The writings about Native Americans belong to four phases. Before Lawrence went to America he wrote the first version of *Studies in Classic American Literature*, and especially the essay on ‘Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking Novels’, in 1917; in 1920 he wrote the essay ‘America, Listen to Your Own’. There followed the work of his first two periods of residence in New Mexico, as outlined above, and finally the essay ‘New Mexico’ written several years after his final return to Europe. This