



REVIEW

Lee, A. Robert. *Native North American Authorship: Text, Breath, Modernity*. Peter Lang, 2022. 352 pp. ISBN: 9781636670485.

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In his latest essay-collection, *Native North American Authorship*, A. Robert Lee presents an engaging convocation of contextualized readings of life-writing, novels, short stories, and poetry by modern Native/First Nations authors. Even some of the latest works are within his reach, including Louise Erdrich's pandemic novel *The Sentence* (2021), N. Scott Momaday's latter-day meditation *Earth Keeper* (2020), Gerald Vizenor's historical fiction *Satie on the Seine* (2020), Diane Glancy's verse collection *The Book of Bearings* (2019), U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo's *An American Sunrise* (2019), Tommy Orange's acclaimed debut novel *There There* (2018), the Teebs tetralogy (2016, 2018, 2019, 2019) by queer poet Tommy Pico, and lesbian author Beth Brant's posthumous *A Generous Spirit* (2019), to name a few.

Through charting a widening map of Native North American authorship, Lee aims to "giv[e] nuance to the notion of a Native American Renaissance born of the 1960s" (5). In this respect, this essay-collection reads as a book-length extension of his article "Rethinking the Native American Renaissance: Texts and Contexts" in *The Cambridge*

History of Native American Literature (2020). It also recalls his voice a decade ago in *The Native American Renaissance: Literary Imagination and Achievement* (2013), a collection he co-edited with Alan R. Velie. For Lee, Native “literary-scriptural history” (2) generally dates to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The word “scriptural,” echoing “Text” from the sub-title of *Native North American Authorship*, narrows down the scope of his discussion to Native literature on written, printed, and even digital pages. Nevertheless, it does not assume orality and textuality as binary oppositions nor ignore the intricate relationship between oral expressions and written texts.

Part I, “Bearings,” explores the “literary hinterland” (15) of the Native American Renaissance. Lee acknowledges the power of the spoken word embodied in various tribal oral-performative legacies like stories, myths, chants, and ceremonies. The rich and evident scriptural heritage is also worth recalling, especially the 1920s-40s fiction. Furthermore, a brief recollection of fiction, poetry, and theatre by Momaday’s contemporaries on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border celebrates the efflorescence and diversity of modern Native authorship. The contextualization of the Native American Renaissance, for one thing, liberates the phrase from accusations of being a fake and rootless periodization that risks deindividuating canonization of Native literature and, for another, re-situates the literary phenomenon referred to as a “platform through which to view past authorship, literary coming-of-age, or point of departure for the future ... beyond the single timeslot, place, gender or typology” (31).

“What, in the wake of the Momaday era, has come since?” (6) This is Lee’s overall concern. Modern Native life-writing offers a meaningful start. In contrast to earlier collaborative or “as told to” narratives like *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), modern Native authors are telling life stories by writing independently, imaginatively, and reflexively. “From the outset, and then increasingly, Native self-writing has steered an unusual double-path” (43), observes Lee. Is it a self-story or the voice of a larger Native identity? Is it an individual or tribal experience? To approach these questions, Lee quotes Momaday extensively. Among many such citations are “Every writer is forced to rely, at some point, on the imagination” (qtd. in Lee 39) and Momaday’s dictum, “We are what we imagine” (qtd. in Lee 57). According to Lee, it is the force of telling, the art of story-making, visionary memories, authorial awareness, and implied listeners that help Native authors imagine the Native self in the modern world and unwrite the imagined



or invented Indian through breathing printed words.

Imagination was once a privilege. In “The Morality of Indian Hating,” Momaday writes, “The Indian has been long time generalized in the imagination of the white men” (57-58). Targeting Western writers like Wallace Stegner, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn deplores their relentless effort to make “tribal imagination silenced or overwhelmed” (xiii). Now, the imagination within Native writing has already turned the table. Imagination, or the act of imagination, is modern Native authors’ breath. “No one grand keypad or stencil prevails throughout this essay-collection” (9), holds Lee, although the word “breath” in the sub-title eventually turns out to be a new metaphor. It works as a new key to Native North American literature that he strives to cut. It lies at the heart of *Native North American Authorship*, the modern texts of Native authors and the modernity of Native texts.

The rich connotation of the metaphor of breath is not elusive for Native people and readers of Native literature. Lee quotes from Linda Hogan’s poem “Turtle”: “In water/the world is breathing/in the silt” (qtd. in Lee 2). Thomas King’s reverence for the Turtle also comes into play, “The world never leaves the Turtle’s back” (qtd. in Lee 3). In addition, one of the cover photos of this essay-collection is an image of Turtle mosaic art from Little Earth of United Tribes, a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) subsidized housing complex in urban Minneapolis that accommodates nearly 1,000 residents with 38 different tribal affiliations (“Little Earth”). The “literal breath” of a spectrum of living spirits on the Turtle’s back, Lee tries to demonstrate, “elides cannily into Native/First Nations literary breath” (3). The literary breath is a conceit, a central metaphor kept alive and repetitively visited from page to page. It suggests that the sovereignty of imagination, the freedom of motion, the capacity for storytelling, the art of creation, the power of liberation, the instinct for survivance, and the infinity of possibilities, all are in a single breath.

The literary breath is a signature of modern Native authors who tend to embrace a variety of choices, chances, possibilities, and cross-genre practices. The tradition of Native inscription runs from “codices and pictographs, through quill and page-print, to digitalization and global cybernetics” (2). Regarding modern Native authors, they can be reservation-centered, city-raised, world-migrants, enrolled or not, status or non-

status, mixed blood or not, writer-poet-professor-critic-activist or an even more hyphenated role. It is only natural that Native writing has been and shall always be full of imagination and in constant motion. Or, as Lee describes it, modern Native authorship has been “adventuresome: urban and speculative fiction, ventures into new gothic and the postmodern, open-form verse, changing styles of life-writing, newly slanted story-cycle, two-spirit and LGBTQI+ gendered texts, reflexive stage performance, and writings that might be called Native international” (3). While loosening all these seams, modern Native authors exhale their literary breaths and create a sense of motion in writing.

Parts II, III, and IV are eye-on-the-page readings of novels (eight chapters), short stories (three chapters), and poetry (five chapters). An extended rewriting of chapter titles discloses the overflowing breath, the relentless motion, and even contradances in Native texts. In full imaginative play, Momaday (Chapter 3) walks words into contemporary plotlines where the main characters living in competing civilizations eventually run to the center of the world. Erdrich’s (Chapter 5) earlier and later novels “sustain close weavings of web and house throughout, family, voice, passion, memory, languages” (91) yet still invite chance episodes, dreams, ghosts, or religious visions. As a postindian city-and-military-fostered storiator, Vizenor (Chapter 7) fuels his storying with tribal visions and postmodern self-reflexivity. Images, paradoxes, disrupted syntax, and broken or run-on sentences form Glancy’s (Chapter 12) unique styling for depicting both continuities and discontinuities of Native experiences and complete her short stories as a luminous whole. Native poetry is no exception. Jim Barnes (Chapter 16) is known as “Oklahoma international, his poetry of sites real and imagined and their peopling one of lasting distinction” (295). The wide range of Hogan’s (Chapter 17) “identity” poems negotiate the beyond-all-binary relationship between the self, of Hogan herself, Native women, even of all individuals, and the habitat, the environmental panorama.

A closer and cross reading of chapters further speaks for the kaleidoscopic aesthetic distinctions born out of literary breaths. Take as an example the creatively different ways modern Native authors write about memory. Memory, be it personal, familial, tribal, continental, historical, or more recent, heard or voiceless, recorded or visionary, part or whole, static or in-the-making, tragic or comic, finds its way into the web of written words. Its presence is imagined as shadows and traces in time-past, time-



present, and time-future. More specifically, James Welch's *Fools Crow* (1986) borders "an act of cultural recovery" (qtd. in Lee 109) where the late-1860s tribal Montana is remembered, re-pictured, seen, and heard. In the fiction of Louis Owens, there stands a "memory theatre" (156), a working key Lee borrowed from Frances Yates. On the stage, death and darkness in memory, memorial irony, dream-vision memories, and forgetting as a paradoxical kind of memory, all jointly perform a complex filtering of remembrance. These distinct narratives of memory "bridge into the yet larger vision of Owens's fiction" (170).

Memory is also imagined to be breathing and in motion by five female poets examined in Chapter 14, "poetry remembrance." For Harjo, memory "was something [that] chose me, that lives in me, and [that] I cannot deny" (qtd. in Lee 246). Her adeptness at animal imagery of life-spirit, horse especially, shows her contemplation on personal and tribal memory, and her contribution to memory-making. Wendy Rose employs bone and body as vigorous imaging of memory in her free verse to understand iconic Native and world history. Glancy summons the disordered or un-chronologically ordered memory that reflects the contrarities within her life and transposes them to visionary Native heritage. For Lucy Tapahonso, poetry is a "self-enactive ritual of memory" (252) where Hózhó, balance and beauty in the Navajo world, is restored. In poems of family portraits and of Native themes by Kimberly Blaeser, memory is honored as "live presence" (254) and "remembered continuity" (255). Despite the different literary breaths of memory, varying lines, rhythms, and imagery in their poetry, Lee ties these five female poets together by pointing out their "shared will to remember Native heritage not only for time-past but time-present, the transition into the contemporary and even the future" (257).

The extension of chapter titles and the example of memory in the previous three paragraphs exhibit more essential qualities shared by Native authors: for instance, a build-up of literary breaths, a reverence for stories, and a flair for storytelling. Stories are cornerstones of Native culture. Leslie M. Silko writes in *Ceremony* (1977), "You don't have anything if you don't have the stories" (qtd. in Lee 197). In *The Truth About Stories* (2003), right after pondering Owens's belief in stories and his suicide, King asks, "Do you ever wonder how it is we imagine the world in the way we do, how it is we imagine ourselves, if not through our stories?" (qtd. in Lee 197). Through this rhetorical

question, King stresses the indispensability of stories to Native existence. Yet Lee aims to test the power of stories by posing better-timed questions. Can Native authors write stories or poems about modern Native existence? Following this, Lee posts more of an aesthetic concern, "Could a Native text be modern?" (16). It can be safely assumed that most readers who browse through the present essay-collection will blurt out positive answers.

Given that modern and modernity are catchall terms, probably often abused, even positive answers barely satisfy all, leaving room for discussions about Lee's particular approach to "a growing sense of modernity" (16) in Native texts. David Scott argues that "modernity was not a choice New World slaves could exercise but was itself one of the fundamental *conditions* of choice" (19). This observation also applies to Native people forced on the road to modernity. Pinning down or generalizing complex terms like modern and modernity might result in reductive clarity. Lee, in all likelihood, acts on Emily Dickinson's "tell it slant" (qtd. in Lee 141) by creating the metaphor of breath. That is, modernity is approached as a fundamental condition of Native authors' literary breaths and aesthetic choices in story-writing. As suggested in the sub-title "Text, Breath, Modernity," the metaphor of breath is to bridge the text and modernity.

To further complicate the question - "Could a Native text be modern?" (6) - one inconsistency in this essay-collection should be noted. The last sentence of the epilogue reiterates the sub-title but in the order of "Breath, Text, Modernity" (331). This is inconsistent with every other mention of the sub-title from cover to cover. Be it a total misplacement or a sign of Lee's hesitation and earlier rumination regarding the relationship between "Text" and "Breath," the apparent mistake here, interestingly, draws attention to the complex implication of the sub-title. Is the text arising out of literary breaths? Are there any breaths within texts? How close are those texts to being labeled as modern? How does modernity make its way into Native texts? All may suggest that "Breath" and "Text" complement and reinforce each other in telling modern Native stories. The texts are not simply parading, as put by Sherman Alexie, "a couple of birds and four directions and corn pollen" yet having "nothing to do with the day-to-day lives of Indians" (qtd. in Lee 141). They are anything but "the dead voices of the wordies" (Vizenor 33).

Native experiences, whether in fiction or reality, are consequences of the temporal,



spatial, and cultural logic of modernity. Native authors imagine the presence of those radical encounters and contact by giving full play to Native cultural vigor and literary creativity. Abundant in stories and poems are depictions of modern reservations, city habitats, mutable identities, new technology, the private ownership of land, the stirred sovereignty, the spreading capitalism, a penchant for violence, the time of clocks, all that “surround” (invoking D’Arcy McNickle’s 1936 novel, *The Surrounded*) “the Indian in modernity” (148). Modern Native texts are creative and active, epitomizing Native imagination and literary breaths. A voice, a time, a place, a kind of immediacy, and a sense of motion are imagined. Printed words are breathing. They connect Native people with their ancestors, liberate them from passive ruins of representation, and even bequeath to them a spirit of modern existence in motion, home or abroad.

While exploring modern Native authorship, Lee occupies himself with recurring aesthetic concerns like “compositional skill, symptomatically [sic] rhythm and sense of an ending in fiction, play of image and pattern in poetry, or the layers and folds of voice in life-writing” (9). These concerns give every particularization to Native moments in the modern world and aesthetic distinctions in modern Native texts. Suffice it to say, Lee is not in a hurry to grapple with terms like modernity. Instead, while maintaining an escape and distance from the messy taxonomy, he embraces and exalts Native imagination, intellectual sovereignty, and literary creativity guaranteed by the metaphor of breath. Modern Native authors, he contends, overflow texts with literary breaths to actively imagine the place of modern Native people in the cosmos; then, naturally, they re-imagine the traditional, primitive, uncivilized, and unimaginative images of “Indians” constructed, abstracted, and invented by the discourse of modernity.

The metaphor of breath, particularly close to those within the cultural geographies of North America, is the fruit of Lee’s international experiences and years of research. Beyond that, the beauty of the metaphor further lies in its cross-cultural motion. It can arouse in world readers a culture-specific memory that is no less natural or inherent than the image of Turtle for Native people. For instance, a Chinese reader may instantly recall the Monkey King (also known as Sun Wukong), a crystallization of Chinese cultural creativity. Chinese classic *The Journey to the West* describes the transforming power of the Monkey King: “He plucked a hair and blew a mouthful of magic breath

onto it, crying, 'Change!'" (Wu 195). The build-up of the magic breath always leads to a timely change, be it a body division, an item changed in shape or size, or a soul manipulated or healed. The infinite changes help the Monkey King outwit others, set this national classic in motion, and create a permanent presence of him in the soul of the Chinese. Similar cross-cultural resonance might send the metaphor of breath back to its birthplace, the international context. This metaphor shall gain circulation among the world readership of Native North American literature, give world readers a head-start in understanding *Native North American Authorship*, and likely inspire more informed readings such as what Lee offers.

Native North American Authorship: Text, Breath, Modernity goes beyond simply being a book-length revisiting of the Native American Renaissance. The exact words "platform" and "point of departure" (31) Lee uses for re-evaluation provides a certain angle to approach the present essay-collection. The eighteen chapters demonstrate the plurality, diversity, and vitality of modern Native authorship that "in truth has created not some by-way but a full history of literary voice" (320). Additionally, both the main title deconstructed in the epilogue and the sub-title glossed in the introduction point to future discussions, be they the oral-scriptural dynamic, Native literary breath and imagination, the remembered timeline in Native literature, Native literature in "a yet more inclusive Native geography" (329), transgeneric aesthetics and interdisciplinary studies, Native literary modernity and Native modernity in general, theory of survivance and transmotion, and so forth. For example, given that Native literary inscription, "from the outset, has had counterparts, alliances of vision and image in the visual arts" (329), it is no surprise that Lee's contextualized readings here can, in turn, be a literary context and a departure point for exploring artistic breaths that sustain other Native textual or visual expressions.

Yifei Jing, Peking University

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