



REVIEW

Annie Wenstrup. *The Museum of Unnatural Histories*. Wesleyan Poetry Series, 2025. 104 pp. ISBN: 9780819501875.

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Dena'ina poet Annie Wenstrup's debut collection, *The Museum of Unnatural Histories*, celebrates curiosity as a way of navigating the world. Modelling an archival practice that extends beyond the assembly consisting solely of documents, the poems present a mode of curation that is as careful as it is probing in its response to "cataclysm's aftermath" (Wenstrup xviii), insisting on the endurance of Indigenous lifeways despite colonial catastrophe. Through poems that range from the formal complexity of the sestina to sukdu/stories and imagined tours that meander through the museum space, Wenstrup's poems at once guide the reader through this imagined museum of the author's own making whilst also relinquishing the assumed authority that we collectively ascribe to the author/curator.

This is a collection that is as invested in challenging the ways in which culture is represented, as it is in showcasing the selection of stories themselves. During an extended Museum Sovereignty Fellowship at the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center in 2021, Wenstrup worked closely with museum staff to think about how heritage institutions can encourage innovative engagement with collections beyond the space of the museum itself. Wenstrup brings this interest in accessing culture to her poems, which thematically cluster around the survivance and sovereignty of culture in the wake of colonization. Yet as a writer, the collection displays an evident preoccupation with issues of narrative, power, and representation—central concerns in both literary and curatorial critique. This balanced approach results in a compellingly crafted debut that uses a poetic imagination to ask what it is that a museum *could* be.

Wenstrup adds to a growing number of Indigenous writers who locate the museum as a focal point in their work. As cultural debates regarding ownership and representation reach a critical mass, Indigenous writers and artists have used their craft both to critique colonial narratives and, perhaps more importantly, to imagine

Indigenous futures beyond the institutional framework of the museum. Holding historical typologies accountable for the epidemic of violence against Indigenous women and girls in particular, Wenstrup's poems ruminate on these inheritances whilst refusing to be wholly bound by their legacies.

From the outset, Wenstrup's museum refuses the assumed binary between nature and culture that the traditional Eurowestern museum upholds through its cleaving apart of human and more-than-human life. Told largely through the entwined voices of Ggugguyni (the Dena'ina Raven) and the character of The Curator, *The Museum of Unnatural Histories* embraces the process of transmission by which stories are passed from ancestors to descendants, from writers to readers. In "Ggugguyni in the Museum Parking Lot," Wenstrup invites readers into a scene in which the boundaries between human and animal are blurred; Ggugguyni picks over human detritus of "diaper bags, car sets, children [...] fruit, / Goldfish, and fries" as the narrator of the poem recognizes how her own "ungainly" nature perhaps destabilizes her security within gendered categories, becoming "more harpy than girl" (xviii). These seemingly fixed statuses—human/animal, girl/"not a girl" (9), history/future—are thrown into disarray in Wenstrup's Museum, revealing the fragility of such familiar typologies in the first place.

The poems repeatedly return to the chronopolitics of colonialism, a theme that is echoed elsewhere in Wenstrup's work. In "From Here," an essay for the journal *About Place*, she observes that "[i]n the stories of colonization and conquest, time is a linear line forward" (n.pag.). Linearity equals "progress," and "progress" (in colonial terms) equals the organization of time and space into neat, discrete categories. This colonial twinning of temporal and spatial arrangements is interrogated via a series of footnotes that act as temporal markers throughout Wenstrup's collection. Riffing on the iconic form of the crew member's log, these footnotes are bracketed by stardates from *Star Trek* (and occasionally earthdates) which "push"—in Mark Rifkin's terms—"against the imperatives of settler sovereignty" (ix), surfacing the simultaneous promise and pitfalls of science fiction's embrace of an alternate chronopolitics.

A recurring figure in these footnotes is Chakotay, the First Officer aboard the USS Starship *Voyager*. Somewhat infamously known as the "first" Native American (main) character in *Star Trek*, Chakotay exemplifies the series' commitment to a narrative of teleological progress whilst simultaneously exposing such blind faith in linearity as a colonial fantasy. Deliberately ambiguous, Chakotay's tribal affiliations are never explicitly stated in *Voyager*. He is simply "Native American," a cipher for liberal fantasies of ethnic inclusion rather than indicative of Indigenous sovereignty. This is, of course, a *Star Trek* specialty; the original series (1966-1979) significantly featured a multicultural main cast, and the 1968 episode "Plato's Stepchildren" is still commemorated as the first (widely) televised interracial kiss between Captain Kirk and Chief Communications Officer Nyota Uhura. Social progress in *Star Trek* is unidirectional, even though part of the show's appeal is its ability to play with the fixity of time and space through its reimagining of both future and past. The fact that the show's producers sought the input of none other than J. Marks or, "Jamake



Highwater," in creating Chakotay's character is illustrative of precisely the bind that *Star Trek's* "Rodberrian optimism" (Wenstrup 9) encapsulates, particularly when it comes to Indigenous representation. Marks was exposed in the 1980s as a fraud, having deliberately misrepresented himself as Cherokee. Whilst Chakotay's character was intended to be a Native American "first," the actor who plays him is of Mexican descent. Whilst I appreciate that this can sometimes be a somewhat tense distinction and is not precisely the same as the ethnic appropriation undertaken by Marks, the realization that Indigenous representation in *Star Trek* is not, in fact, Indigenous representation lays bare the myriad contradictions that Chakotay's character encapsulates. Devoid of any real depth beyond being included in settler wish-fulfilment of deep space as a post-colonial fantasy, the promise that Chakotay's character seemingly represents for a speculative timeline in which Indigenous peoples are integral in and to the future is fundamentally warped. Yet representation can be a powerful thing. "Exhibit B: Un-filed Correspondence" presents a bittersweet letter addressed to Chakotay himself. The narrator laments the "unreality" of the First Officer, wanting to "want you. Because you were a wanted / NDN, someone I wanted to be" (66).

If Chakotay is a figure who embodies both betrayal and belief, Wenstrup's thematic preoccupation with the speculative also offers an alternate chronopolitical poetics. As readers, we sit with the poet as she watches looping *Star Trek* reruns. As we watch together, the idea of a "time-paradox" (Wenstrup 9) slowly bleeds into something beyond an impassioned fictional peril for the series' characters. In the Museum of Unnatural Histories that Wenstrup imagines, time moves in cycles, a continual stream of televised entertainment, news, and violence that Ggugguyni and The Curator pick over in their assemblage of material. Rather than conforming to a linear narrative, Wenstrup's selection of cultural references reveals the nature of The Museum as a heterotopia. Ggugguyni and The Curator do not attempt to create order, theirs is instead a recursive practice that treats so-called "victims" like JonBenét Ramsey, the six-year-old girl whose still-unsolved murder was the subject of salacious theories and extensive media interest in the 1990s, and the actual people behind the MMIWG hashtag with care and respect, seeing them as people who deserve memorialization beyond objectification and/or erasure. The linear form initially suggested by the use of *Star Trek*-style stardates in these footnotes rapidly disintegrates as the reader realizes that these too are being played and watched on an endless network loop. Unable to escape the documentation of History, we as readers are instead invited to sit with Ggugguyni and The Curator as they continue to collect and tell stories, ruminating over them as we look and re-look at their collected exhibits. In this quiet, reflective space, we might glimpse an alternative to the relentless "line marching West over a fixed map" ("From Here," n.pag.) that colonialism insists on imposing.

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Works cited

Rifkin, Mark. *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Wenstrup, Annie. "From Here". *About Place Journal*, vol. VII, no. IV, no date, <https://aboutplacejournal.org/issues/the-more-than-human-world/communion/annie-wenstrup/>.