

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn. *That Guy Wolf Dancing*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014. 125 pp.

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The plot of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's new novella is propelled forward by the bequest of a mysterious "Indian artifact" from a dying, Demerol-addicted socialite to its narrator, Philip Big Pipe. What is this artifact? Why did this woman leave it to one of her hospital attendants, whom she knows only as "the Indian?" How did she come to possess it? How will the presence of this object impact the life of a man who claims that his "great gift" is to "feel inconsequential" (19)? If these are the most obvious questions driving the story, there are also a number of other more subtle lacunae that highlight the depth and complexity of this fine work. In many respects, *That Guy Wolf Dancing* fits neatly in Cook-Lynn's oeuvre of fictions dealing with the Big Pipe tiospaye of the Crow Creek Reservation (the series of books now published together as the *Aurelia* trilogy). As in those earlier texts, Cook-Lynn here creates a distinctive and challenging form of tribally-specific realism which explores questions of jurisdiction and authority. What sets her new book apart from the older work, perhaps, is its particularly subtle treatment of the problem of individual alienation and agency in contemporary Indian Country. *That Guy Wolf Dancing* gestures more towards an existentialist politics of authenticity than one might first expect from an author who has famously rejected what she sees as the mere thematization of settler-colonial experience in narratives narrowly focused on problems of individual identity. Cook-Lynn's great success here, however, is in rethinking the existentialist dilemma through a tribally-specific lens. In doing so, she has produced her most satisfying and sophisticated work of fiction since the 1980 short story collection *The Power of Horses*.

One of the most striking features of this novella, to me, is its approach to handling place. A great deal is said in the text about the "white town" that serves as the primary setting for much of the narrative (1). Philip repeatedly comments on "this college town a mere couple of hundred miles from the Crow Creek Reservation" (1), "this little college town not too far from the Rez" (14), or "this river town [the Vermillion River] with its state college" (34). There is enough of this type of exposition sprinkled throughout the book to allow the reader to deduce that we are probably talking about Farmington, Minnesota (just outside of Minneapolis-St Paul). Cook-Lynn's recurrent recourse to this incomplete mapping of the setting is rather suggestive, however. Instead of being merely clumsy or repetitive, it actually serves to draw our attention to her dogged refusal to ever name this settler-colonial place. That omission is particularly striking when one notes both her contrasting specificity in discussing tribally-significant places (like the Crow Creek Reservation, the Missouri River, and the old Indian footpaths alongside it) and the novella's explicit invocation of the place-centered Dakota narrative genre of the *keyapi* tale in discussing the constellation and sacred place called *Zuzuecha*, the snake. (Zuzuecha, we will eventually learn, is intimately related to the mysterious artifact and its role in Dakota history.) Reflecting its narrator's own quiet defiance, *That Guy Wolf*

Dancing endeavors as much as possible to refuse to recognize colonial space and authority. Philip reinforces this sense of resistance explicitly in the book, both by referencing the Yankton Sioux Indians' possession of land "for, some say, thousands of years" and by offering only the most limited cooperation with authorities investigating the death of the socialite (euthanized by her husband in the hospital) based on his understanding of Yankton treaty-rights. The evasion of narrative conventions and external legal authority represents just some of the ways that Philip's story is a "wolf dance."

"Wolf Dancing" is never explicitly defined in the text, though its meaning emerges fairly clearly through context. A basic definition would be Philip's own: "trying to be something that I'm not" (9). Based on what has already been said here, however, it should be clear that this type of deviance is an ambiguous act, varying greatly in significance depending upon whether it is directed outward at the colonial society of the U.S. or inward at the Dakota community itself. Such ambivalence is central to the novel's complex characterization of Philip. His insistence that he is not a stereotype (not a "loser" or "stoic"), along with his apprehension of the empty materialism and violent heritage of American society, clearly represent positive aspects of his refusal to meet certain expectations of him (43). At the same time, he struggles in many respects to locate himself in contemporary tribal life, having fled the reservation to seek an alternative path that he cannot fully articulate or realize. Philip variously describes himself as a cynic, a nonbeliever, a transient, and an exile, and he clearly sees that one of the negative aspects of his "wolf dancing" is the way it separates him from his tiospaye. (It is no coincidence that the novella's title links his wolf dancing with the nameless anonymity of being simply "that guy.") Interestingly, though, Cook-Lynn is very careful to avoid depicting Philip as a familiar type of "tragic" Indian protagonist, caught between two worlds in a struggle for individual identity. (This is the kind of contemporary Indian narrative she loathes.) In the end, Philip cannot really be described as an alienated character. Rather, he is a philosophical man patiently, if somewhat passively, living his life in a quest for an authenticity that goes beyond mere individualism. "People think I'm just an Indian guy without much insight, 'just doing my thing,'" he observes, "but the truth is I'm a Santee Dakota born and bred, which means is it my obligation to be something more than just a guy occupying space" (46). While he recognizes that he is struggling with deep personal grief (tied to the suicide of his uncle Tony), Philip regularly evinces a quiet confidence that he will eventually figure out what his obligations are. "In my heart," he notes, "I know the steps you take lead you nowhere unless you attempt to direct and control and develop the dance itself" (45). Philip is simply in no hurry to take control of that process of development.

The most explicitly stated theme in the novella is the idea of the accident. It is through various instantiations of this theme that Philip is able to reflect fully on the balance between fate and personal agency in the way that he, as a Dakota man in 1980s America, must confront personal and tribal history. In one telling moment, Philip's lover Dorothy brings him to an epiphany regarding his struggle with Tony's death by observing simply

that “some people survive and some don’t” (93). This simple mantra allows Philip to begin to place *survival* at the center of his consciousness, instead of death: “It was clear then that I had been drifting in my own sorrow, ‘by accident,’ going about my so-called life emptying bedpans and changing sheets for people I didn’t know, and I was doing it because I couldn’t make sense of senseless death. And because I wanted an explanation for things that had no explanations” (94). At this point, it would seem that Philip’s journey into an authentic, functional life might be a conventionally existential one—surrendering the search for transcendent meaning in the face of absurdity and chance and embracing the individual will to life. But Cook-Lynn is no Sartre or Camus (despite an epigraph in the novella from the latter), and so Philip eventually comes to feel that it is as problematic to embrace a radically individual liberation as it is to surrender to inactivity. What he comes to see is that history proceeds in ways that involve us in larger patterns of meaning and experience whether or not we seek them out.

It is at this point that the mysterious artifact reveals its centrality to the story. In time, Philip learns that he has inherited a buckskin war shirt (and war stick) adorned with a snake pattern. This regalia had been stolen from the grave of one of the wakicun, the “shirt-wearer” society of the Santee, over a hundred years ago. Significantly, it had been worn by one of the Mankato 38, hung by the U.S. government in the largest public execution on the nation’s history at the conclusion of the Dakota War of 1862. Philip’s recovery and repatriation of the shirt changes his relationship to his tribal community as well as his own sense of consciousness and purpose. The shirt creates a new sense of structure for the entire narrative. Understanding it allows him to ground his developing political consciousness (formerly rooted mostly in books) in a deeper awareness of Dakota history and relationship to place. The snake pattern also invokes both one of the key constellations of Dakota cosmology (and thus the Dakota origin story) and a sacred place located near Medicine Creek spoken of in a keyapi tale partially re-told in the novella. At the latter “Zuzuecha,” the rocks have been arranged in the form of a snake “to commemorate those times of becoming, those times when the world was just becoming” (47). Significantly, at the end of the novel, Philip will be on his way north to this location, engaged in both a literal and figurative journey of becoming.

Cook-Lynn subtly develops the motif of the journey throughout the book, linking it broadly to Dakota identity through the traditional stories of their original migrations to earth as the “Star People,” through invocations of prophetic knowledge regarding the nation’s difficult journey during the historical period where the Sacred Hoop has been broken, and through Philip’s own personal wanderings. Philip’s grandfather Big Pipe reminds him that “when we were oyate wichapi we journeyed into the real world by the sky path,” and that “the sky path is just a path to humanity” (44). Philip’s increasing understanding of this path allows him to move beyond his sense of transience and develop a more complex understanding of how he must engage with the “accidents” of his life. To be sure, there remains at the end of the novel a tension between an existentialist quietism and a more active and tribally-grounded type of agency. Philip observes at the end of the novel that he “no longer asked the question of whether this was

history or just a series of ‘accidents’; it if was destiny, or is it had any deeper meaning than the absurdity of being human” (121). What he has concluded is that “any man who believes in the power of ancient rock shrines, I knew then, could simple fade into the landscape” (123). This fading is not passivity in the face of traumatic history, though. It is a grounded sense of purpose, one that balances an awareness that by engaging with narratives larger than our own we shape our experiences and relationships. It also reflects a recognition that individual human beings possess the strength to endure the vicissitudes of chance.

Philip’s ability to embrace two somewhat contradictory propositions--that “some people survive and some don’t” and that “there are probably no accidents” is not an index of philosophical confusion, but rather of balance (95). By the end of the narrative, he is able to hold to the notion that there is a structure and purpose to Dakota life, even in a time of historic trial and transition. This awareness does not suggest a fatalist passivity, however. Philip’s journey is nowhere near over at the end of the book (one wonders if Cook-Lynn plans another trilogy), but this seems appropriate considering the nature of his character and its development throughout the narrative. Philip’s experiential process is that of an extremely thoughtful Dakota man engaged in the serious philosophical work of reconciling what he knows about the land and being Santee with the world that settler colonialism has made around him. He comes to embrace the burden of living with/through the time of the Broken Hoop and transcends his cynicism to remain open for deeper insights, insights that have not necessarily come by the final pages. The novel concludes with Philip heading north toward Zuzuecha “making it my business to find that dancing road...through history and difficult times...toward the shapes that are open to the sky, a cure for my own exile” (125). The lack of closure here, I would suggest, is both another facet of the realism that Cook-Lynn is striving for in the text and a reflection of the fact that she has written a book that truly celebrates the depth of Dakota thought—a Dakota philosophical novel, one might say. She is content, therefore, to end her narrative with the depiction of her reflective protagonist’s emerging understanding of his relationship to a history that he can shape as well as endure. To the extent that this denouement challenges some readers’ expectations of how a plot should resolve itself, the novella itself is wolf dancing just as much as its unusual hero.

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