
Margaret Noodin. *Bawaajimo: A Dialect of Dreams in Anishinaabe Language and Literature*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014.

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This book is a very important analysis of some of the better known modern-day Anishinaabe creative writers. The strongest point is the manner in which Margaret Noodin closely examines the use of Anishinaabemowin, the Anishinaabe language, by the authors under consideration. As such, this review will primarily focus on that aspect of the book. The authors Noodin studies are, in order: Louise Erdrich, Jim Northrup, Basil Johnston, and Gerald Vizenor.

Since the use of Anishinaabemowin by the given authors is the central theme of the work, Noodin begins with a discussion of the Anishinaabe language. This chapter was especially significant for the approach utilized by Noodin. Generally speaking, when scholars discuss Anishinaabemowin in attempting to explain the importance of the language, they usually take a linguistic approach. So, for example, they will include such basic aspects of the language as the division between animate and inanimate word classes and the variety of verb forms. In the latter case, the four types of verbs in Anishinaabemowin will be explained in detail, that is, the transitive, animate verbs (VTA); transitive, inanimate verbs (VTI); intransitive animate verbs (VAI); and intransitive, inanimate verbs (VII). For her part, instead of taking the linguistic approach, Noodin follows the path of the poet. So, even though she mentions there are four types of verbs, she does not delineate them, but instead discusses broader concepts associated with certain specific verbs (10-11). The same is very much true for the other aspects of the language she discusses. But, that is fine because Noodin does something that is very rarely accomplished by scholars in discussing Anishinaabemowin: she provides more of an emotional feel for the worldview generated by the language. Language has many aspects, and certainly the grammar structure and other linguistic considerations are important. However, the emotional affect of a language cannot and should not be ignored, especially in the case of Anishinaabemowin since that emotional aspect has an impact on the real-world attitudes and actions of the Anishinaabeg.

There is one aspect of Noodin's explanation that I found particularly important: the idea of centering (11, 16-17). As Noodin discusses, the structure of Anishinaabemowin provides a fascinating dynamic to the language. In some ways, words in Anishinaabemowin are not bounded. Instead, the language is highly agglutinative, meaning prefixes and suffixes can be added to words to greatly add subtleties and shifts in meaning (10). Pronunciation changes due to the syntax of the language, such as the initial vowel change to indicate the conjunct form of a verb, further complicate the picture. As such, it might be said the words in Anishinaabemowin dance with their high variability. As Noodin argues, this effects concepts involving the notion of centering. It really cannot be said there is one, static center at the heart of any given word in Anishinaabemowin. Instead, the center is dynamic in that it seeks to capture the flow and flux of the world, the dance alluded to above. This notion of a dynamic center has an impact on Anishinaabe concepts of the self as well, then, such that no one is ever seen as

forever being fixed in terms of both their actions and attributes. Instead, the dynamic center reaches out in many directions, constantly engaged in the dance of life. In fact, it is that dance that defines the Anishinaabe self. This is why it is so important that Noodin brought the insight of the poet to her analysis. It is one thing to explain the linguistic structure of Anishinaabemowin in great detail. It is quite another to capture the essence of the language and explain it in a way that is approachable for non-Anishinaabe people.

In some ways, though, therein lies the dangers, and dare we say subversive nature, of Noodin's writing. Although I would highly recommend the book be assigned for any variety of college courses dealing with Anishinaabe culture and literature, it needs to be acknowledged that the clear spotlight Noodin shines on Anishinaabe language, culture, thought, and worldview is so radically different from Western approaches, it might be extremely difficult for individuals not versed in the culture to fully understand and appreciate the gift Noodin is offering to the world. For example, in Western thinking, the concept of the soul involves a fixed entity. From the Christian point of view, there are really only two states for the soul, one of damnation due to original sin, and one of salvation through baptism. In Catholic theology, once an individual goes through baptism, that act can never be undone and one becomes forever a member of the body of Christ. The Anishinaabe approach is not better. It is simply different. But it takes a very open mind to fully appreciate the implications of the Anishinaabe worldview and how it is reflected in their worldview. For example, in my article from 2002, "The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion," I discussed A. Irving Hallowell, who wrote about Anishinaabe sacred stories. Hallowell stated despite the fact they are sacred stories, they are often humorous. I countered by writing they are humorous not despite the fact they are sacred stories. They are humorous because they are sacred stories (449). One important aspect of Noodin's book is that, while not explicitly citing my work, it takes the sentiment informing that observation and demonstrates how it functions in the writings of Anishinaabe authors, most especially in terms of the often sexual nature of their works. This is most clearly seen with Vizenor (172-73), but the phenomenon can be found in the works of Erdrich (67-68) and Johnston (127) as well. One of the realizations I had in reading Noodin's book, then, was to take my earlier thoughts about the comic vision of the Anishinaabeg and apply them to sex. Thus, my comments above about the humorous nature of Anishinaabe sacred stories could just as easily be changed to say: they have a lot of sex in them not despite the fact they are sacred stories. They have a lot of sex in them because they are sacred stories.

Now we can start to see the truly revolutionary nature of Noodin's writing. She presents us with a double whammy, in a matter of speaking. First, she presents a worldview that is radically different from the West, especially in terms of conceptions of the self. She uses the connection between language and worldview to explicate the writings of various Anishinaabe authors, often referring to the dynamic nature of the centering process. That alone is enough to challenge Western ideas and ideologies, and so is revolutionary in its own way. Then she goes beyond that by exploring all the ways Anishinaabe notions of centering result in completely different attitudes and actions by the Anishinaabeg, as expressed in the writings of these authors. In this review I have concentrated on issues related to sexuality as that topic represents perhaps the most extreme difference between

Anishinaabe and Western ways of thinking. Taken as a whole, though, what Noodin is saying is that the Anishinaabeg are different, and non-Anishinaabeg need to accept and deal with the Anishinaabeg just as they are. I admire her for standing up so strongly to assert the value of Anishinaabe culture.

To finish this review, I would like to say two things. The first involves her overview of Anishinaabe literature. In certain respects, Noodin is dealing with what might be called the “usual suspects” when it comes to scholarly criticism of Anishinaabe writers. But, in Chapter Two she goes into detail about all the wonderful Anishinaabe authors from across the years. This is a nice addition to the book and provides a good entrée for those wishing to further explore Anishinaabe literature. Second, it may seem odd I did not go into great detail about Noodin’s actual explication of the Anishinaabe authors in question. In that regard, I decided to borrow from the approach of the oral tradition in which what is left unsaid is just as important as what is said. There is no need to go much beyond what I discussed above. Noodin has written an extremely insightful critique of some of the most important Anishinaabe writers of our time. Her approach is unique and challenges the reader on many levels. To find out how her insights pertain to the individual authors she examines, the reader will have to read the book for him or herself.

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