

**Maurice Kenny. *Monahsetah, Resistance, and Other Markings on Turtle's Back: A Lyric History in Poems and Essays*. Norman, OK: Mongrel Island Press, 2017. Print.**

**Rachel Bryant. *The Homing Place: Indigenous and Settler Literary Legacies of the Atlantic*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier, 2017. Print.**

When asked to consider reviewing Maurice Kenny's *Monahsetah* and Rachel Bryant's *The Homing Place* for *Transmotion*, I took the opportunity to consider together these two seemingly disparate books—one a famous Indigenous poet's last lyric collection, the other a young settler scholar's first academic analysis. They turn out to have quite a bit in common. Both toy with the lines between the creative and the scholarly, the Indigenous and the European. Both contribute thoughtfully to our field's ongoing conversations about sovereignty and survivance, territoriality and land. And both are firmly grounded in, and determined to *(re)indigenize*, northeastern North America, known to many of its first peoples as the Dawnland.

If transmotion defies statist, territorial definitions of sovereignty, Indigenous people in this region have exceedingly long histories of transmobility. According to some of their oldest stories, people have always been inclined to travel across boundaries—geological boundaries, boundaries between kin groups and clans, boundaries between human and other-than-human. To this day, the violence of settler colonialism denies formal “recognition” to many northeastern tribal nations, while segregating them in the remote past, on fixed territories. Yet Indigenous people have continued to protect their lands, cultures and kin, here--as elsewhere--through story. Writing in this journal's first issue, Deborah Madsen defined transmotion as “the practice of transmitting cultural practices across time as well as spaces of travel and trade (24). Kenny and Bryant are two traveling, trading intellectuals who devote considerable thought to precisely how Indigenous people have moved, exchanged, and endured.

Maurice Kenny died in April 2016, gifting us with a final collection of prose and poetry that revisits characters and ideas he pondered for much of his life. It's in two parts. For this reader, the second, “Markings on Turtle's Back,” is the more compelling. Rooted in his home in Haudenosaunee territory, this section reflects on the people and places, historic and contemporary, that Kenny knew and loved. There is a charming catalogue of the beloved “knick-knacks” that decorate his work-space and remind him of his friends and kin, such as poems and essays about Indian stereotypes, or recipes for maple mush and shepherd's pie. There is also a long piece on Molly Brant, wife of the British diplomat Sir William Johnson, sister to the Mohawk chief Joseph Brant, and subject of Kenny's highly regarded 1995 book, *Tekonwatonti: Molly Brant: Poems of War*.

In this piece, Kenny comes to terms with *why* Tekonwatoni fascinated him for so many decades. Originally, he says, he believed that her story (not familial, and not even transmitted familiarly) was “not *personal* to me, but merely *persona*” (161)—that is, until a young PhD student named Craig Womack came along. Womack's research helped Kenny understand that “if Molly was not actually based on my birth-mother, she was possibly the mother I ‘had always desired’” (161). With this new insight, Kenny poignantly starts to excavate the story of his mother, a woman who was “Seneca by descent,” though she “held no ties, no sentiments and little knowledge of that culture.” (Intriguingly, she was also “an ever so great-granddaughter of the English poet Robert

Herrick.”) Doris Herrick Kenny Welch was reserved; she was strong. Like Molly Brant, she experienced war and family disruption, moving to New Jersey to work in a defense plant during World War II. Like Molly Brant, too, she risked being forgotten without someone to write her story, a fate on which Kenny, at the end of his life, seems to be ruminating. “Few of us are remembered,” he writes, though by exploring such stories and genealogies, he hopes we might discover “a line of blood between all of us on Turtle’s back” (169).

The first and longest part of this book, “Monahsetah,” is a little more uneven. Kenny’s relationship to this figure is a little more vexed and ambiguous, though he spent decades writing about her, too. She first came to the poet’s attention in Mari Sandoz’s 1953 bestseller *Cheyenne Autumn*, which reported that this daughter of a Cheyenne chief was captured in the 1868 Battle of Washita River, and later gave birth to a son by George Armstrong Custer. Historians disagree about this last part: Adrian Jawort (Northern Cheyenne) accepts written Cheyenne oral histories reporting that Monahsetah had Custer’s son and even that she was devoted to him; others believe that Custer was likely sterile from gonorrhea (Agonito 96). Monahsetah’s story has been written, indeed *overwritten*; since Sandoz’s book, google N-gram tells me, she has been periodically and enthusiastically taken up by settler historians captivated by that old trope of a complicit Indian princess (most recently and horrifyingly in a romance by Custer’s great-great-granddaughter).

Other writers, including Charlotte DeClue (Osage) have represented Monahsetah as a resistant, unwilling captive. Kenny certainly paints her that way, at least at first:

You ask why  
did I not take my knife and rush it  
into his belly allowing his enemy blood  
to river into my people’s Oklahoma earth.

He called me to his bed.  
    . . . I was his war treasure,  
his hunk of gold, a pot of flesh. There was no escape. (2)

If Kenny found in Molly Brant a mother, he seems to have looked to Monahsetah for some kind of sister or twin. “In 1966,” he says, “I began looking for her, and somewhere along the way, I found myself” (15). His method of recounting this search is to alternate prose poems dated to the 1860s, imagining Monahsetah’s story, with pieces dated to the 1960s, charting his own political, aesthetic and sexual awakening. Kenny recalls reading Sandoz as he was returning home from a long stay in Mexico, and witnessing the violence of Vietnam, and suddenly grasping the global and temporal continuities of Indigenous people: “up and down two continents. . . a program of extermination of Indians”: “It took courage to truly observe the land of my birth where part of my blood was hated and the other part imported into a land knee-deep in genocide and bloody with racism, sexism and homophobia, blockades to liberty and happiness let alone sexual fulfillment” (4).

These pieces, then, evoke a sense of mixed-blood ambivalence and alienation perhaps more common to Native American literature and criticism of the late twentieth century than we tend to see in the present, more tribal-centric literary moment. Sometimes the parallels to Monahsetah’s

story in this vein are quite powerful; for instance, Kenny endows her with a political awakening of her own when she watches male Cheyenne leaders capitulate to plans to remove the tribe to Sand Creek: “When Monahsetah asked her father who the soldiers were protecting the people from, he could only shake his head that he did not know” (35).

Less comfortable are the poet’s attempts to represent this Cheyenne woman as chafing against ostensibly restrictive traditional gender roles: for instance, she deploras “the life of a common woman, the drudgery and slavery to lodge and husband” (10). One senses, perhaps, the queer poet’s own desire to depict and imagine tribal life outside of heteronormative patriarchy, but it’s hard to separate a passage like this from garden-variety stereotypes of Plains Indian women as “drudges.” It’s equally uncomfortable to read the intimate scenes with Custer, and the rape passages when Monahsetah is temporarily married to a Cheyenne husband against her wishes.

*Monahsetah and Other Markings* is edited by Chad Sweeney, Kenny’s student, friend and collaborator, and it would be fascinating to know exactly what his role was in editing and arranging these various pieces. He says that he worked with Kenny for over a year on this project, and that Kenny died while still working on those Custer sections. He was in too much physical pain to keep writing, and understandably “reluctant to guess at Monahsetah’s level of complicity” (v). Some parts of the Cheyenne sections do indeed feel rushed, like Kenny was hastening to make sense of everything he had read, written, thought and felt. The strongest sections—vintage Maurice Kenny, empathetically imaginative when it comes to depicting Indigenous women, history, and space—remind us that the subaltern does speak, but that we can never know whether heard her correctly:

Monahsetah went into story  
long tales and short talks  
probably imagined  
perhaps a handful true  
to a few facts of her breath (16, 125)

Indigenous writers from Craig Womack to Cheryl Savageau and countless others have paid Maurice Kenny due homage for his support of Indigenous literature, and for the gathering places he created at his Strawberry Press and the magazine *Contact/II*, as well as at his own home in Saranac Lake, New York. But where “the gathering place” is conceptualized as a place where Indigenous people have traditionally and continually regrouped, shared and exchanged, the “homing place” is Rachel Bryant’s way of trying to understand how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have struggled to live together and to communicate across cultural, political and epistemological divides.

Bryant is a settler Canadian scholar, currently at Dalhousie University as a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council postdoctoral. Her book takes seriously sovereign treaty relationships between First Nations and Settler Canadians on every level—political, epistemological, cultural and literary. Writing is (or should be) an attempt to communicate across these many divides, but Bryant finds an invisible and too often impenetrable wall between Western imaginaries and Indigenous knowledge systems. In her reading, Anglo-Atlantic writing has built a “system of self-protection” that has sought to contain Indigenous geographies and

indeed Indigenous agency. Indigenous writings, she argues, have challenged and chipped away at those Western imaginaries, though Western readers have nevertheless managed to absorb those challenges, often remaining stubbornly unchanged by them.

Because Bryant reads regionally, with a focus on English-language writing on both sides of the US/Canadian border, she is able to unpack settler exceptionalisms in new ways. The homing place (continuous present) is a process, Bryant's revision of an influential theory of "home place" proposed by Gwendolyn Davies to apply to Maritime writing, one that will be familiar to scholars in American Studies as a gambit connecting place and identity. Where Davies theorized the "home place" as a trope that allowed settler writers to become Maritimers, feeling that they owned places as intellectual property, Bryant proposes *homing places*:

In the non-human world, homing is the process through which beings such as pigeons, lobsters, salmon, sea turtles, and butterflies navigate unfamiliar locales as they work to return to a state of familiarity. It is a process that only works in cooperation with all other forms of life; intrusive human-made elements, like pesticides and commercial ships, adversely affect the ability of insects and sea animals to receive crucial navigational cues from their surroundings. Of central importance to the process of homing, then, is the constant struggle to *receive* essential information across the various barriers and interruptions that have been systematically built into the everyday workings of the Western world's industrioscience culture. (27)

This lively construction suggests the broad interest of Bryant's study, touching on concerns common to Canadian, American and Indigenous Studies, as well as to Ecocriticism and the Environmental Humanities. Indeed, in one of her most innovative, *transmobile* chapters, she reads across Passamaquoddy territory, bisected today by the US/Canadian border, yet enduring in Indigenous people's lives and knowledge as a hom(ing) place, Peskotomuhkatik. Settlers on both sides of this border, she shows, have used maps, diplomatic and legislative documents, and histories to control access to Indigenous resources. At the same time, Indigenous people and the land itself have maintained their own opposing narratives of continuity--in oral traditions, wampum belts, and rock formations. For Bryant, understanding these conflicting positions is an ethical stance with ongoing urgency; as she writes in a later chapter, it "challenges Settlers, the direct beneficiaries of North American colonization, to consider for a moment that ours is not the only world and that the ground beneath our feet has a history and an identity that we have actively and anxiously hidden from ourselves" (181).

Three other chapters also examine the work of settler writers: John Gyles, a New England Puritan who wrote a captivity narrative about his years with the Maliseet people during King William's War; Anna Brownell Jameson, an English settler and nineteenth century feminist essayist; and Douglas Glover, whose 2003 novel *Elle* re-imagined the popular story of Marguerite de la Rocque, a sixteenth-century French noblewoman who was abandoned on an island during Jacques Cartier's final voyage to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Bryant shows how such writers, especially Gyles and Jameson, install their identities in settler space, disrupting Indigenous communities and "divest[ing] land of any pre-existing (or pre-contact) meanings or agency" (21). In Glover she finds a little more willingness to un-settle a sense of unitary imperial

identity. She calls this “cartographic dissonance,” as Glover’s protagonist gradually comes to apprehend, to *see* competing cultures and epistemologies located in the same geographic space.

The remaining two chapters turn to two Indigenous poets. Bryant reclaims the more famous of the two, Rita Joe (Mi’gmaq), from a tradition of literary criticism that has tended to frame her as a cultural mediator. This older way of reading Indigenous women was not uncommon in Native American and Indigenous literary criticism, especially during the 1990s, and Bryant’s insistence that Joe *challenges* settler violence and settler refusal to listen is refreshing and persuasive. Her chapter on Josephine Bacon (Innu), who is perhaps better known among Canadian/First Nations scholars than among Indigenous Studies scholars elsewhere, similarly shows how Indigenous writing counters colonial violence. This chapter situates Bacon’s poems squarely within Innu cultural history and tradition, reading them as alphabetic tshissinuatshitakana, or message sticks that reconnect Innu people with their unceded land.

*The Homing Place* is published by Wilfrid Laurier Press, which is producing intellectually groundbreaking, materially gorgeous books in Indigenous Studies. Their series, under the dynamic editorship of Deanna Reder (Cree-Metis), includes the excellent collections *Read, Listen, Tell* and *Learn, Teach, Challenge*; as well as Daniel Heath Justice’s much-anticipated *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. The generous, professional production given to *The Homing Place* is a wonder to behold: the typography and cover alone are stunners, but the book also gets a good number of plates to show off significant images like wampum belts. The real glory is the treatment given to a 1939 address written by Chief William Polchies: four full-page, full-color plates that reveal in extraordinary detail the birchbark on which Polchies wrote, the leather binding at the spine and the edges, and the fully legible text, first in English, then in Maliseet. These images powerfully underscore Bryant’s persuasive argument that the birchbark book is a “distinct Indigenous material form,” one that “evokes and engages the ‘place-world’ from whence [Polchies’s] diplomacy emerges, subsuming Settler Canadian relations, traditions and ruling structures under the necessarily higher authority of laws and practices that, for centuries, allowed the Maliseet people to use and care for their land” (15). At the level of scholarly content and visual production, this book could not be more beautifully done.

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