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**Red Readings:  
Decolonization through Native-centric Responses  
to Non-Native Film and Literature**

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The idea for this issue of *Transmotion* came from the bottom of the sea. While watching the 2014 film *Godzilla*, I was struck by ways in which the famous lizard's battle with a flying, radiation-eating monster resembled the dynamic relationship between the Anishinaabe creatures of Mishibizhiw (water monster) and Animikii (thunder beings). I wrote up my thoughts then about those similarities in a blog posting titled "Godzilla is Red: An American Indian Reading of the King of Monsters" (Andrews).

This issue's theme became more fully developed when I proposed a "Red Readings" panel for the Native American Literature Symposium in 2015. This issue's essays from Becca Gercken and Ken Roemer were presented in shorter versions then; at that session Margaret Noodin presented a paper on Sapho and Gertrude Stein, but for this issue she focuses only on Stein. I proposed "Red Reading Rides Again" for the 2017 NALS, and Shawaano Chad Uran presented a shorter version of his essay on *The Land of the Dead*. Both sessions were well-attended, and they provided lively, intelligent, and often funny presentations. Brian Burkhardt submitted his re-imagining of John Locke's work through the Cherokee trickster of Jisdu independent of those sessions, but he will present it at NALS this year on a panel devoted to Cherokee culture. So I want to thank the organizers of the Native American Literature Symposium for indulging me and creating a space to conduct such thought experiments. I encourage people interested in native literature, film, and art to consider attending the annual event (<https://nativelit.com/>).

First I should say the name "red reading" is not an attempt to racialize or essentialize a particular literary response. I thought of the name simply to create a catchy title for my panel at the symposium. The reader does not need to be native for this practice, but the reading should be native-centric; the reading process should be grounded in issues important to native communities and/or native intellectual histories or practices. Put most simply, a red reading produces an interpretation of a non-native text from a native perspective.

Once I came up with the title for the panel, I discovered that James Cox had used this phrase in his book *Muting White Noise* (attributing it to Jill Carter’s 2010 doctoral dissertation). For Cox, a red reading re-interprets representations of native people in non-native texts; this “is an act of liberation from the imaginative foundations of colonialism” (9), and he demonstrates several such readings in his book. (I also learned that Daniel Heath Justice had used the phrase in his chapter of *Indigenizing the Academy*, but he used it to describe centering college classrooms on texts by native authors.)

For my NALS panels and for this issue of *Transmotion*, my approach to a red reading is different from Cox’s. While his fine book deconstructs narratives about American Indians that enable colonization (narratives that have been weaponized against native people), the red readings in this issue work in one or more ways: they reveal the pervasive mechanisms of settler colonialism in American culture; they re-imagine those mechanisms in order to resist and alter them; they build bridges between native literatures and canonical American literature, but they do so by placing native perspectives at the center of the discussion; and they are imaginative and playful. The essays in this issue were written in the same spirit that Kimberly Blaeser describes for the works of Gerald Vizenor: they are dedicated to "liberation, imagination, play, and discourse." In *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*, she claims: "His writing seeks to function as both the presentation of an idea and as an invitation to discover where that idea might lead, an invitation to engage in a dialogue" (4).

How do they do that? By interpreting, re-interpreting, transposing, or deconstructing non-native texts from a native perspective, sometimes playfully and sometimes seriously. What happens when you read a non-native text from a native perspective? What disruptions in a text are made possible by reading it with native assumptions? What latent meanings can become apparent? What new meanings can be produced?

I think of red reading as similar to “queering,” which also is an invitation to discover where ideas might lead. In the introduction to a special issue of *Art Journal* in 1996, Jonathan Weinberg wrote that queering things such as works of art or literature has the objective of “making them strange in order to destabilize our confidence in the relationship of representation to identity, authorship, and behavior” (12). Making things strange in this way was part of a larger effort by queer artists and academics to “investigate the mechanisms by which a society claims to know gender and sexuality” (11).

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Weinberg's description of queering parallels Cox's goal for red reading. A red reading can destabilize the dominant culture's confidence in the relationship of its representations of American Indians to actual native people. In this sense it also is similar to what Gerald Vizenor called "trickster hermeneutics," which is the process by which those representations of American Indians are deconstructed as tools for dispossessing native people of their lands, identities, and political and cultural sovereignty. Trickster hermeneutics is a corrective to the misrepresentations fostered by the dominant culture, and those misrepresentations are elements of what Vizenor called "Manifest Manners," the methods by which the United States of America tries to realize its dreams of Manifest Destiny. Trickster hermeneutics and other examinations of race representations are (to again echo Weinberg's language) efforts to investigate the mechanics by which the dominant culture of the United States claims to know race, including whiteness – since the role of the Indian in many representations is to be the Other against which American whiteness defines itself.

The essays in this issue do not try to destabilize representations of American Indians; instead, they seek to destabilize, among other things, the dominant culture's confidence in representations of itself. That includes, for example, destabilizing fundamental conceptions upon which America's settler colonial nationhood has been built; Burkhart does this by imagining Jisdu (Rabbit, the Cherokee trickster) helping correct John Locke's thinking. It also includes shaking the dominant culture's assumption that its literary canon is the standard against which all others are measured; Noodin and Roemer do this when they measure canonical authors (Gertrude Stein and Walt Whitman) according to native standards. The essays in this issue also investigate the mechanisms by which the dominant culture knows nationhood and the narratives that enable it.

But back to queering. Craig Womack also sees an affinity between queer and native responses to texts, and he also sees the trickster potential of such responses. In the last chapter of *Red on Red*, Womack writes: "Also, the thinking behind the term 'queer,' which seems to celebrate deviance rather than apologize for it, seems embodied with trickster's energy to push social boundaries" (301). Reading non-native texts from a native perspective similarly celebrates the difference between the native and the non-native, between native epistemologies and a settler colonial state that seeks to erase or appropriate them. In that chapter, Womack interprets the play *The Cherokee Night* by Lynn Riggs through a queer lens; Womack suggests that Riggs conflates

Cherokee identity with homosexuality in the play – native and queer being things oppressed by the mainstream and things repressed by some people who are native and/or queer but who wish to live in that mainstream. Womack suggests homosexual desires and denials are never named in the play but greatly influence the play’s plot and the actions of its characters – a reading that Riggs, as a closeted homosexual, perhaps would have denied. This is trickster-like since Womack evokes meanings the original speaker would have not intended, twisting a speaker’s words into a different message – perhaps even into the truth (or another truth). Gercken does this with “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Uran does it with *The Land of the Dead*. Like Womack reading *The Cherokee Night* through a queer lens, they read their texts through a lens of settler colonialism. Womack asks something like this: “What if Riggs’s lived experience as a closeted gay man influenced the content of his play?” Gercken and Uran ask, “What if being immersed in a colonizing culture influenced Perkins and Romero in the creation of their narratives, even in ways they would not have recognized?” While the native-centric readings offered in this issue of *Transmotion* may not upset social boundaries (I doubt they will offend anyone), they imaginatively push on intellectual or academic boundaries.

Reading non-native texts from a native perspective can be seen as part of the larger project of cultural studies and criticism. That project tries to understand cultures through their various expressions and representations (including “high” and “low” culture, such as canonical literature and Hollywood films or Gothic cathedrals and Las Vegas casinos). In their contribution to *What is Cultural Studies?*, John Frow and Meagan Morris state that cultural studies examines

... practices, institutional structures and the complex forms of agency they entail, legal, political, and financial conditions of existence, and particular flows of power and knowledge, as well as a particular multilayered semantic organisation; it is an ontologically mixed entity, and one for which there can be no privileged or “correct” reading. It is this, more than anything else, that forces cultural studies’ attention to the diversity of audiences for or users of the structures of textuality it analyses - that is, to the open-ended social life of texts...” (355-356).

Native-centric readings add another voice to the diversity of audiences that Frow and Morris mention. The readings may consider non-native texts, but they are texts likely to be experienced

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by native readers, whether directly in a school classroom or on a television screen, or indirectly through the governmental policies established upon or supported by them.

If we understand red reading as a kind of reverse-appropriation (the colonized stealing from the colonizer and repurposing those cultural tools), we can also acknowledge that many acts of interpretation are a kind of appropriation, even when no cultural boundaries are crossed. Much of cultural studies (including literary criticism) examines texts from the past, and we can understand those interpretations as a kind of appropriation through time. While an interpretation may claim to uncover *new facts* about old texts, it may instead produce *new uses* for them, regardless of their original meanings. Herbert Grabes wrote something similar to this in “Literary History and Cultural History Relations and Differences”:

And we know that the signifiers of the past lend themselves not only to an attribution of meanings informed by a knowledge of the culture within which they were produced.

Their selection and interpretation are also subject to the inclinations and needs of the later culture within which they are newly approached. The functional history of literature will therefore also have to integrate the history of reception – at least in part – a history of “misreading”; which is, of course, only a misreading in respect to its being different from the one most likely at the time of the texts’ production. (28)

If what Grabes says is true, then we could say that a functional history of American literature will need to integrate a history of native reception or native “misreadings.” How does a native perspective make sense of non-native texts? What uses can a native perspective find for a text that was not produced with it in mind? For instance, Gercken’s pleasurable misreading of “The Yellow Wallpaper” in this issue. A native perspective could find that short story to be a useful allegory for experiences with federal Indian policy. Who cares what Charlotte Perkins Gilman intended with her story?

The first version of my panel title for NALS was “Red Reader Response” (I changed it simply to make the panel title shorter), and Grabes’s emphasis on the importance of reception in literary history and criticism illustrates how this issue’s theme arises from interpretative methods such as Reader Response Criticism. In fact, I consulted *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism* in preparing this introduction. Several ideas from that famous

book are helpful in describing the goal of the essays in this issue, but I will discuss only one here. It comes from Walker Gibson and his chapter titled “Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers.” Gibson states that each text has two readers: the actual human who is reading and a mock reader “whose mask and costume the individual takes on” (2) to participate in the imaginative experience being created by the text. Sometimes this could involve the actual reader pretending to be a character in an author’s fictional universe, such as when Nanapush in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* tells stories to his granddaughter, Lulu; this includes directly addressing her, but the actual reader knows she is not present; the actual readers are pretending at some level to be Lulu and trying to imagine her responses to Nanapush’s stories while also tracking their own responses. A different example would be readers of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*. Her novel famously is built from Laguna Pueblo cultural capital that most readers do not possess, relying as it does upon Pueblo beliefs and storytelling traditions. Silko’s mock reader is steeped in Laguna Pueblo history and culture, and the actual readers must realize there is much they are missing from the experience of reading the novel. (We hope that actual readers are persuaded to learn some about that history and culture and then return to the novel to more fully appreciate its artistry and its message.)

Of course, Gibson had neither Erdrich nor Silko in mind when he wrote “Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers.” The examples in his chapter come from American canonical authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nathaniel Hawthorne. But in considering the reception of various texts by a mock reader, including the challenges that some texts present for mock readers, Gibson makes a statement that is relevant to red readings. He writes: “A bad book, then, is a book in whose mock reader we discover a person we refuse to become, a mask we refuse to put on, a role we will not play” (5). We can easily imagine native readers being uncomfortable with the masks a settler colonial text asks them to wear, even those texts that do not involve representations of native people. We can imagine, for example, native readers refusing to share the spoken and unspoken assumptions made by John Locke in his “Second Treatise on Civil Government.” We can imagine their alienating experience of reading that and other texts in the canon of literature produced by settler colonial nations. We also can imagine the useful exercise of non-natives reading those same texts as a native mock reader, using a native perspective to defamiliarize their own cultural texts. Perhaps if more non-native readers

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examined the works in their canon from a native perspective they would be liberated from some of the dangerous ideas found there.

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