
Heid E. Erdrich *New Poets of Native Nations*. Graywolf Press, 2018. 304 pp. ISBN 978-1-55597-809-9.

<https://www.graywolfpress.org/books/new-poets-native-nations>

After all these years, this sudden wealth.

Those are the first words of Mick McAllister's review of *Carriers of the Dream Wheel* and *Voices of the Rainbow*, both published in 1975 (360). Those books are considered landmarks in American Indian literature because they made available to the general public the work of many poets that public may not have known existed. Those two volumes demonstrated the existence, the richness, and the diversity of native voices.

We can revise McAllister's opening exclamation to talk about Heid Erdrich's anthology of native poetry:

After all these years, this continued wealth.

Like those 1975 anthologies, *New Poets of Native Nations* demonstrates the richness and diversity of poetry from Indian Country (and beyond). These poets continue the legacy of those voices gathered in 1975, but they add to them in several ways, including their explicit declarations of nationhood, their use of native languages, and their formal sophistication and experimentation.

New Poets may seem like "sudden wealth" if only because the previous substantial anthology of US Native poetry was published in 1988 (according to Dean Rader, quoted in Erdrich's introduction). Closing this 20-year gap also makes *New Poets*, like its 1975 predecessors, a potential landmark. The publicity material from Graywolf Press uses that word to describe the book, and several of its many positive reviews have echoed that language.

Those earlier anthologies were landmarks for introducing readers to many poets they would not have encountered otherwise. Several of those poets went on to become canonical authors for college courses in American literature: Simon Ortiz, Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, Joy Harjo, etc. *New Poets*, as its name indicates, does not include those names; it contains only a selection of poets who published their first poetry book after 2000, regardless of age or experience. So some of them are new to book publishing but not necessarily new to poetry. Some of them have found some fame already. [Layli Long Soldier](#), [Natalie Diaz](#), and [Tommy Pico](#), for example, have won awards for their poetry books and have received attention in popular media outlets; also, they have Wikipedia entries devoted to them. Other poets here may have won awards but they have yet to receive such broader recognition; no Wikipedia entries for Sy Hoahwah, Tacey M. Atsitty, or Julian Talamantez Brolaski, for example. At least not yet.

(Perhaps that is a good task for someone's native literature class: create Wikipedia entries for these and other native writers.)

So what has changed for native poetry since 1975?

A lot, of course. Too much to consider here. But I can focus on a couple of developments.

One of the earliest rhetorical and interpretive maneuvers in American Indian literary criticism (and one of the most persistent) was drawing connections between contemporary literature by native people and oral traditions. Kenneth Rosen did that in his introduction to *Voices of the Rainbow*: "For some readers it may be helpful to place these poems on the oral/written continuum so central to American Indian literatures in general, and to Indian poetry in particular" (xx). The phrase "oral tradition" does not appear in Erdrich's introduction.

Perhaps it is ironic, then, that the poems Rosen selected were influenced by the aesthetics of native orality and yet none of them make significant use of a native language. That absence may be a sign of colonization's impact, but it does not make the poems less valuable or diminish them as acts of cultural and personal resistance.

And yet perhaps it is also ironic that Erdrich does not use the term "oral tradition" in her introduction and yet native languages frequently appear in this collection. If the absence of native languages is a sign of colonization's impact at the time of *Voices of the Rainbow* and *Carriers of the Dream Wheel*, their presence in *New Poets of Native Nations* is testimony to acts of sovereignty in native communities within the United States (and elsewhere).

For example, Gwen Westerman has a poem entirely in Dakota. "Owotaṅna Sececa" is presented on one page and its English translation, "Linear Process," appears on the following page. Westerman's poems skillfully inhabit particular moments in time but also often evoke the transcendence made possible through our connection with ancestors. That connection and devotion is represented by Westerman's speaking and writing in Dakota. Margaret Noodin's poetry comes in twin columns: the left in Anishinaabewomin and the right in English. For example, "Agoozimakakiig Idiiwag/ What the Peepers Say" describes the emergence of frogs from their hibernation and suggests several kinds of renewed singing. There is the literal renewal of the frogs singing in the spring, but there also are the growing voices of native poets singing in the aftermath of colonization, and there is the singing of the people learning their native languages. Noodin's poetry is lyrical and wise, and it is frequently about the mysteries of being and of language itself.

Cultural continuity and contemporary presence are essential to indigenous survivance, and several poems in *New Poets* reflect that in their relation not to orality but in their relation to typography, to print culture. For instance, in Long Soldier's "Whereas Re-resolution's an Act," she presents legal / treaty language with blank spaces to be filled in by the reader: "Whereas Native Peoples are [] people with a deep and abiding [] in the []..." (25). She presents legal / treaty

language as a trap designed to reduce native concepts into simplistic ones, and so her poem removes them to protect them (although the missing words are provided on the following page). And “Obligations 1” and “Obligations 2” descend their pages so that the reader can trace different connections among the words, creating different poems, sort of like a “Choose Your Own Adventure” poem. Performing such a poem in a spoken forum is hard to imagine; it is made for the page and to be seen / read.

Another example of the influence of print culture is from Craig Santoz Perez, a poet from Guåhan (Guam). His poem “I (Tinituhon)” is presented as a series of paired characters evenly spaced in lines across the page: letters, punctuation, numbers, and symbols. At first scan, the poem’s subject is not apparent since no words are readily visible. The poem requires the reader to slowly follow the characters, piecing together the words they form across the gaps. Again, this is a poem made for the page, to be deciphered with our eyes rather than our ears.

Erdrich’s collection makes clear that Indian County is digital. Several poems make use of texting conventions, again literature we consume with our eyes rather than our ears – although it is true social media conventions have invaded our actual speech, since people do say “hashtag this” or “hashtag that” or “OMG” or “jk.” Excerpts from Pico’s books *IRL*, *Nature Poem*, and *Junk* include conventions created for cell phone keyboards. His poems, which oftentimes originate from his Twitter account, consistently use *n* for and, *NDN* for Indian, *r u* for are you, etc. While Pico’s poems are presented in the sassy slang of his poetic persona Teebs, Brulaski’s entries mix text-message influences with elevated vocabulary. Her poem with the wonderful title “What Do They Know of Suffering, Who Eat of Pineapples Yearround,” uses misspellings that look like text-messaging shortcuts or that suggest emphatic pronunciations. The poem starts with “Lrsn,” which suggests “Listen” but also with some warping, the way “club” becomes “clerb.” It includes *cd* for could, *whos* instead of who’s, *yr* for your, and yet it also includes words such as *battlements*, *pulchritudinous*, and *edifices* in a kind of mock-epic tone (135).

Although there are some “new” poets that I wish had been included in *New Poets*, I realize that some choices had to be made. I realize that I am fortunate to live in a moment exploding with bold and exciting talents. Including every deserving poet would have made a book too thick to pick up. Personally, I am happy Hoahwah is included and the he continues to explore the Comanche Gothic (my phrase, not his) that he started with *Velroy and the Madischie Mafia* (2009). His poems are gruesome, comical, and mystical. Their subjects include a Comanche Princess who drags herself from the grave, a decapitated head singing to itself, and the threat of being eaten by a “raccoon-witch-cannibal-monk” (151). I don’t know that this macabre fun is present in *Carriers of the Dream Wheel* or *Voices of the Rainbow*.

These new poets of Native nations carry their voices into an indigenous future that settler colonialism tried to foreclose and that mainstream publishing too seldom recognizes. I will end this review with the last lines of Karen Wood’s “The Poet I Wish I Was,” which I believe speak to the need for writing an indigenous future. It is a list poem in prose that concludes:

14. *However good we are, we can't change the beginning or the middle – we can only try to rewrite the end* (237).

Scott Andrews, California State University, Northridge

Works cited

Hoahwah, Sy. *Velroy and the Madischie Mafia*. West End Press, 2009.

McAllister, Mick. Review of *Carriers of the Dream Wheel* ed. by Duane Niatum, *The First Skin Around Me: Poems by Native Americans*, edited by Mark Vinz & James L. White, and *Voices of the Rainbow*, edited by Kenneth Rosen. *Western American Literature*, vol. 11 no. 4, 1977, pp. 360-362. Project Muse. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.1977.0030>

Niatum, Duane, editor. *Carriers of the Dream Wheel: Contemporary Native American Poetry*. Harper & Row, 1975.

Pico, Tommy. *IRL*. Birds LLC, 2016.

---. *Junk*. Tin House, 2018.

---. *Nature Poem*. Tin House, 2017.

Rosen, Kenneth, editor. *Voices of the Rainbow: Contemporary Poems by American Indians*. Seaver Books, 1975.