
Gordon Henry Jr. and Elizabeth LaPensée, editors. *Sovereign Traces, Volume 1: Not (Just) (An)Other*. Michigan State University Press, 2018. 112 pp. ISBN 9781938065064.

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The enduring and damaging colonial stereotype of the static “Indian” who exists solely in the past is pervasive not only in mainstream contemporary literature, but also in wider pop culture narratives. However, when we centre Indigenous knowledge, it is clear our ancestors were engaging with non-linear ideas around temporality, visioning methods to gain an understanding of the future, and maintaining multifaceted relationships with other beings in the universe. While colonialism has impacted many of these ontologies, contemporary Indigenous artists are challenging imposed perspectives and redefining perceptions of indigeneity by drawing upon these concepts in creative ways. Indigenous storytellers are reclaiming these innovative traditions, suggesting “we need to glimpse the old spiritual world that helped, healed, and honored us with its presence and companionship. We need to see where we have been before we see where we should go, we need to know how to get there, and we need help on our journey” (Deloria Jr. xix). As the late scholar Vine Deloria Jr. emphasizes, Indigenous peoples have always had an intimate and integral relationship with the cosmos that is rooted in our teachings, languages, and lived realities. Ingenious and complex concepts of interrelatedness and continuity are embedded in Indigenous storytelling. Therefore, the awakening of Indigenous Futurisms in literature provides a pathway for Indigenous storytellers to rekindle their ancestral connections to the universe while weaving in bold contemporary artistic techniques. *Sovereign Traces, Volume 1: Not (Just) (An)Other*, thoughtfully edited by Gordon Henry Jr. and Elizabeth LaPensée, reveals the possibilities of redefining reality and strengthening indigeneity in literature today through Indigenous eyes and voices.

Sovereign Traces is an exciting compilation of fiction and poetry that honors Indigenous storytelling while also embracing inventive approaches to visual expression through the medium of the graphic novel. The artists explore a variety of important themes highlighting multi-vocalic views, multi-layered techniques, and nuanced understandings of the raw realities of Indigenous lives. The visual artists paired with each storyteller have meticulously crafted graphic worlds for the reader to interact with and become enmeshed. Some of the visual artists, such as Weshoyot Alvitre’s illustrations in Joy Harjo’s “Deer Dancer” and Delicia Williams’s images in Stephen Graham Jones’s “Werewolves on the Moon”, have created work more akin to what is familiarly seen in Western comic books while other artists such as Elizabeth LaPensée in Louise Erdrich’s “The Strange People” have employed more stylized illustrative techniques. The wonderful combination of powerful visuals and storytelling in each panel invites the reader to experience the depth of what is being presented with movement, feeling, and thought. Each of the works, whether in the form of previously published short stories or poetry, has been adapted seamlessly in the graphic medium and have added nuances in this format. The artists in *Sovereign Traces* are not afraid to approach tragic issues around racism, intergenerational trauma, disrupted families, substance use, violence, and extractive relationships as experienced in Indigenous communities. Many of the storytellers delve into loss, struggle, and the examination of views around truths and untruths in profound ways. Yet, the intensity within these works is balanced

with a focus on relationality, humility, transformation, and humor—teachings which underscore the idea that if we remember who we are as Indigenous peoples, then we will find our pathways.

Many of the stories center kinship, family, and community ties in ways that prompt us to think about reframing our relations with our fellow beings—water, the land, and animals. The artists ask the reader to consider how we conceptualize kin and how we can strengthen our relationships with our extended families. What does community look like and how do we treat our relations? This is not understood as power over one another in a hierarchy, but a way of thinking that prioritizes reciprocity and integrity in which respect flourishes. Throughout the works, the importance of family and intergenerational connections is articulated, and the artists examine the ways communities have been disrupted and changed over time. As the elder medicine man, Snowbird, in Richard Van Camp’s “Mermaids” points out, he has no interest in monetary accumulation or other materially driven aspects of life, but longs for someone to visit with him that he could talk to and share tea (90). The act of visiting is not just a simple kindness for Indigenous peoples, but a way of life. The emphasis is not on blood ties, but rather on embracing concepts of kinship to other beings in the universe. Many of the stories present a self-reflexive journey in questioning what happens when we forget our responsibilities to our fellow beings. How does it impact us when we overlook our teachings around reciprocity and relatedness? As Warren Cariou posits in “An Athabasca Story”, sometimes you can howl at the land and ask for forgiveness, but she may choose to not answer you in return (53).

Sovereign Traces is brave enough to question where we are at presently and to consider defining where we want to go as Indigenous peoples. As argued by one of the characters in Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair’s “Trickster Reflections,” “Tricksters aren’t real. They’re stories” (59). What is real and what is merely a story? Can a story be real and living, too? The characters include medicine men and non-human beings like trickster figures, animal relatives, and animated land. However, none of this is presented as strange or otherworldly, but as lived experiences evoking familiarity in our everyday lives. The artists implore the audience to reflect upon who has the power to decide what is tangible and felt. Many of the works create space for examining struggles around identity and authenticity and challenge the accepted narratives perpetuated by the colonial world. In *Sovereign Traces*, Indigenous artists are at the forefront centering Indigenous perspectives and cultivating Indigenous visibility. One of the most important aspects of Indigenous storytelling is that it is a living process sustained by the breath of storytellers. We have our old stories, but we need new ones as well. *Sovereign Traces* should embolden us all to consider the possibility of using imaginative approaches to how we engage with historical, contemporary, and future pathways as Indigenous peoples. After all, creativity and transformation are traditions, too.

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Works Cited

Deloria Jr., Vine. *The World We used to Live In: Remembering the Powers of the Medicine Men*. Fulcrum Publishing, 2006.