



Transmotion

Vol 11, No 1 (2026)

10th Anniversary Issue



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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Transmotion publishes new scholarship focused on theoretical, experimental, postmodernist, and avant-garde writing produced by Native American and First Nations authors, as well as book reviews on relevant work in Vizenor Studies and Indigenous Studies.

The broad use of Vizenor-created theoretical terms in many different academic fields (e.g. law, literature, anthropology, sociology, museum studies, etc.) highlights the fact that Vizenor Studies represents a significant interdisciplinary conversation within the broader field of Indigenous Studies. As such, the editors of *Transmotion* look for submissions that do any of the following:



- ✚ Look at Vizenor’s work directly, as well as the work of related authors and theorists in the field.
- ✚ Employ Vizenor’s theory to look at other writers.
- ✚ Continue Vizenor’s project of bringing together traditional indigenous knowledges and Asian or European continental philosophy.
- ✚ Explore the inter-relation of image and text, art and literature, in Vizenor’s work.
- ✚ Contribute to recent developing conversations in contemporary Native American art and literature, in relation to questions of visual sovereignty, visuality, and ethics.
- ✚ Offer innovative, surprising, unexpected and creative critique of American Indian literatures or other creative arts.
- ✚ Emphasize experimental, theoretical, and avant-garde Native North American work.

The journal also accepts creative or hybrid work, provided that such work aligns aesthetically with the aforementioned editorial emphasis. The editors particularly welcome submissions of innovative and creative works that exploit digital media.

Transmotion is hosted by the University of Kent and produced in collaboration with California State University, San Bernardino, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Vancouver Island University, Kennesaw State University, and the University of Dayton, under a Creative Commons license. All submissions will be double-blind peer reviewed, in a process reviewed by our editorial board.

Enquiries regarding submission are welcome and may be sent to the editors at transmotionjournal@gmail.com Scholarly articles should be 20-25 pages in length, prepared according to the MLA Style Manual. Creative work can be of any length. We are also very keen for scholars to put themselves forward as potential book reviewers and to volunteer to be anonymous peer reviewers.

Information regarding on-line submissions of full drafts can be found at:
<http://journals.kent.ac.uk/index.php/transmotion/about/submissions#onlineSubmissions>

To contact the editors: transmotionjournal@gmail.com



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EDITORIAL

11.1 – 10th Anniversary Issue

It's okay to celebrate your own birthday a little late, isn't it? Honestly, it's not because we're self-conscious about our age, we just don't know where the time goes. Despite our best efforts we have singularly failed to clone ourselves, although we have gradually increased the team over the years. So on the occasion of this, *Transmotion's* 10th anniversary issue, we'd like to start with a round of thanks to all those closest to the journal who have dedicated time and energy over the years to editorial labour—from fellow founding co-editors James Mackay and Laura Adams Weaver to wonderful guest editors and everyone else in between. Our current team is particularly indebted to editorial assistants who graft away behind the scenes, so Bethany, Fran, thank you, and a hearty welcome to Soph Harris-Nijmeijer who joins us as assistant nonfiction reviews editor for the next issue. We are also hugely grateful to our Board who have supported and energised us from the off. And of course, we couldn't open the 10th anniversary issue without a shout out to the man whose ideas, stories, and neologisms are the reason this journal exists at all—Viz, we salute you!

We had no idea what we were starting when the indomitable Dr Mackay approached David² and Laura back in 2014. We knew from the get-go that we wanted to be fully open access, free to all users at all times, and we just happened to coincide with a push at the University of Kent for online open access journals. That first issue in 2015 was a big leap in the dark, but the warmth of reception from authors and readers alike has exceeded our expectations and for that, 10 (or so) years on, we are eternally thankful. Several of our contributors have gone on to win awards for their essays in this journal. Others on the creative side have generously collaborated with us relatively early in their trajectories and gone on to do fantastic things (we're not claiming credit, just happy to

cheer them on). We rely on your generosity (and patience), on goodwill and a good word, and it is testament to Indigenous Literary Studies that all of those qualities abound.

This might be an opportune moment to remind readers that all editorial work on the journal is done on a voluntary basis. The hosting fees we pay to remain open access have thus far been covered by the University of Kent's Templeman Library and the modest budget of the Centre for Indigenous and Settler Colonial Studies at the University of York. Sponsorship remains a key target, not least as we figure out how to cover the cost of moving our archive from Kent to White Rose University Press. It is a moderate cost, but a cost nonetheless. If any of you have bright ideas or deep pockets, we would love to hear from you...

In the meantime, we hope you enjoy the offerings in vol. 11, issue 1, Spring 2026 (sssh, don't ask what happened to Fall 2025, nobody's noticed). We weren't sure we'd get to the triple 1s when we put out the first pair of digits, but we're delighted and (with humility) proud to have done so. We are joined in this issue by Kirstin L. Squint, who maps out the Native South through Leanne Howe's tribalographic framework; by Alexander Pettit and James Cox on a tour through the comedic work of Lynn Riggs; by Rene Dietrich, who circumnavigates the European scene with three insightful interlocutors. Denise Low reflects in passionate and moving ways about her time teaching at Haskell Indian school before the incomparable, inspirational Gerald Vizenor himself opens up a time capsule containing a recorded interview he did with Vine Deloria Jr. back in 1969. Shannon Toll's interview with Daryl Baldwin and Kara Strass at the Myaamia Center, Miami University, rounds out the middle section before we close with a selection of ever-thoughtful reviews. We love doing this work. We hope you enjoy the outcome.

David Stirrup
David Carlson
Bryn Skibo
Shannon Toll
Shelley Saggar
Laura M. De Vos



ARTICLE

Tribalography and the Native “South(s)” *For Leanne Howe*

KIRSTIN L. SQUINT

Preface

When I was asked to write about the “Native South” for *Transmotion’s* 10th anniversary issue, an article which would both reflect on the state of Indigenous literary studies and look to its future, I was simultaneously excited and deflated. At that time, I had just finished two chapters on the subject matter, both for books designed to be companions for studies of U.S. literatures, and I felt that I had said my piece on the matter. Yet, I also knew that I hadn’t found a way to properly articulate my own discomfort with the label “Native South,” from the position of someone who primarily works in the field of southeastern U.S. Indigenous literary studies. In addition, I am descended on both my mother’s and father’s sides of the family from settlers to the region and continue to live there as a settler scholar and professor of Native American and Indigenous literatures. For many years, I have attempted to understand and deploy



Indigenous literary methodologies in order to decolonize my scholarship and teaching, as well as to ally myself with tribal nations in the region. Because of my close engagement with the work of Choctaw Nation scholar, poet, novelist, playwright, and documentarian LeAnne Howe, whose writing I have previously argued is an exemplar of Native southern literature,¹ I decided to read the "Native South" through her decolonizing methodology of tribalography. As she notes in her paradigm-shifting essay, "The Story of America: a Tribalography," this is "a tall order" (42). What follows is my attempted tribalography, structurally modeled after "The Story of America," in which Howe demonstrates the multi-modality and non-linearity of the approach. Given Howe's own evolution of her neologism, I thought it fitting to weave in her concept of "embodied tribalography," a later theorization, which argues that Native Americans embody the lands from which they originate, highlighting the central role of land within Indigenous epistemologies (Howe, *Choctalking* 174). This experiment, reading the field of Indigenous southeastern literature through a tribalographic lens, compels a decolonial reckoning and demonstrates what Howe notes in our interview with Gina Caison on the podcast *About South*: the "Native South" is "a fiction" (19:33).

Part I: Acknowledging the Land

The coast of the land that became known as North Carolina was ground zero for English colonialism in what became known as North America. The Algonquian peoples residing on the barrier islands east of the place where I now live and work first welcomed and then later warred with the English colonials who settled on their land. Manteo, of the Croatoan village, and Wanchese, of the Roanoke village, traveled to England, met Queen Elizabeth, and taught the scientist, Thomas Harriot, how to speak their language. Yet, what appeared to be a burgeoning alliance fell apart due to repeated aggressions by the English and their unwillingness to engage in the diplomatic protocols set forth by the Croatoans (Lowery 23-25). Volumes have been written about Walter Raleigh, Francis Drake, John White, and a certain "lost colony," so



that is not a line of inquiry I intend to pursue. As Lumbee historian Malinda Maynor Lowery notes, “Far less is written in tribute... to the Indians who continued to maintain power in that region for more than a century after these events unfolded” (27). In Lowery’s *The Lumbee Indians: an American Struggle*, she painstakingly details the ways that tribal peoples banded together to avoid settler colonialism on North Carolina’s coastal plain, and in particular, the ways that distinct groups coalesced along the swamplands of the Lumber River, in the present-day home of the federally-recognized Lumbee tribe (32-39). Lowery maps the lands of Lumbee ancestors as far east as the state’s barrier islands, where first contact and its subsequent alliances and antipathies played out.

My institution of employment, East Carolina University, sits on the traditional lands of the Tuscarora Nation. Lowery describes the Tuscarora War, from 1711-13, as a “violent explosion” (30). It was a product of settler encroachment across North Carolina’s coastal plain and resulted in “fifteen hundred to two thousand Tuscaroras” migrating northward to become the sixth nation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Richter 239). This history is adjacent but connected to “The Story of America: a Tribalography,” in which LeAnne Howe makes a compelling argument about the ways that the story of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the coming together of the original Five Nations in approximately 1500 A.D., influenced figures such as William Penn, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson as they imagined the unification of the colonies which would become the “United States” (39-42). Howe’s essay demonstrates how history, whether it is scientific history or political history, is always a form of story. This premise sets up her neologism, “tribalography,” defined as a specific Native approach to storytelling that encompasses infinite temporal modes, tribal members and their kin (human and non-human), and non-tribal members (42). The form of Howe’s essay also demonstrates that tribalography is multi-modal and can include a

diversity of genres such as oral stories, scientific theories, critical analysis, political history, and poetry.

In *LeAnne Howe at the Intersection of Southern and Native American Literature*, I detail the ways in which the author's work can be classified as both Native American and southern literature, thus falling within the classification of "Native Southern" literature. Howe is a Choctaw citizen, the first of the tribes Removed from the region that became known as "the South" in the southeastern United States, through her birth mother. She is also the daughter of a Cherokee Nation man and an adoptee of a Cherokee family in Oklahoma (formerly Indian Territory), where she was born and raised (Squint "'An American in New York,'" 99). Though some critics have resisted the idea that Oklahoma Natives from tribes that were forced westward to Indian Territory by the Indian Removal Act of 1830 should not be classified as "southern"² or even "southeastern,"³ my scholarship has argued otherwise since Howe has set creative work in the Southeast such as her novels, *Shell Shaker* and *Miko Kings*, and selections from her poetry collection, *Evidence of Red*. She also regularly alludes to the traditional lands of the Choctaw in present-day Mississippi and Louisiana, in particular the Nanih Waiya mound in Winston County, Mississippi, the sacred emergence place of the Choctaws, according to some oral traditions.

How Indigenous southeastern literature is defined has evolved over the last couple of decades with increased literary criticism on the topic. Scholars of southern literature have wrestled with how to talk about Indigenous literatures of the region, given the field's continuing emphasis on the black-white cultural binarisms that evolve from the legacies of plantation slavery. Annette Trefzer rightly claims in her monograph, *Disturbing Indians: the Archaeology of Southern Fiction* that "[all] Southern literature begins with American Indian literature of the South" (92), and Eric Gary Anderson bolsters this idea by noting that the South is "a place that has been Native for vastly longer than it has been southern" ("Literary" 18). Yet the name, "Native South," centers the colonial construct of "the South," which typically connotes those



states which seceded from the U.S. as the Confederate States of America. Of course, “Native” is a term that is still regularly used as a referent to Native American people of the United States, but what problematizes this issue is the nativism of some white southerners who “[appropriate]” and/or are “[preoccupied]” with Indigeneity (Byars Nichols 173).⁴ Despite such concerns, it is also true that many Indigenous peoples of the U.S. Southeast use the term “Native South” or “Native Southern” or refer to themselves as “southern,” as a clear identification with the region that produces our unique accents, foodways, and other cultural markers.⁵

Aside from the connotative problems of what both “Native” and “South” can signify separately and together, it is a limiting classification in which to encompass diverse lifeways from a complex geographic region that extend long before European and U.S. settler colonialism. These lifeways continue in contemporary Indigenous literatures through ancient forms such as oral traditions and contemporary forms such as novels and screenplays. However, the term became reified with the first publication of the history journal *Native South* by University of Nebraska Press in 2008 (Squint 18), and it was defined broadly, considering the violent ramifications of settler colonialism, including the widespread diasporas of the Indian Removal Act. In order to intervene in what I saw as a problematic narrowing of that definition in the aforementioned texts, *Reconstructing the Native South* by Taylor and *The People Who Stayed* edited by Hobson, McAdams, and Walkiewicz, I introduced the term “Interstate South,” in my monograph on Howe’s work to demonstrate the mobility of Southeastern Indigenous identity, “a space in which Native Americans travel physically and metaphorically between tribal national and US boundaries” (Squint 21). This term doesn’t adequately solve the problem of referencing “the South,” and this particular definition of “Interstate” can also clearly refer to other Indigenous peoples’ experience. Gina Caison has argued in a similar vein that,

the narrative does not have to be *about home* to *write home* within an Indigenous tradition. This reading allows critics to loosen 'a sense of place' from land claim and renegotiate the tensions that inform settler colonialism as occupying spaces in an attempt to undermine indigeneity as coterminous with land tenure (5).

Caison's claim relies on Choctaw scholar Michael Wilson's ideas about Indigenous resistance fiction and how authors "write home" (5). Specific to the U.S. Southeast, Miriam Brown Spiers succinctly explains, "the legacy of Indian removal complicates purely spatial distinctions" (54).

In order to localize my position, I am grounding this essay in eastern North Carolina because it is the land upon which I live and work, and I wanted to take the advice of Drew Lopenzina, who teaches at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, about two and half hours north of my home. In his introduction to the *Routledge Introduction to Native American Literature*, Lopenzina suggests that teachers of Native American literature "begin where you are" and "ground your discourse in the Native space you occupy" (5). I do this in my Native American literature courses at East Carolina University, linking to the institution's Land Acknowledgement page on our course website,⁶ not only making students aware of North Carolina's state and federally recognized tribes, but also giving them information about ways to support Indigenous students. In addition, I give them an assignment that involves visiting our Indigenous People's Space adjacent to the university's main campus student center and writing about what they learn there. I have also recently begun a community- and archivally-engaged research project with the Neyuherú·kẹ' wampum belt, gifted to "the people of North Carolina" by the Tuscarora Nation in 2013 and preserved in East Carolina University's Special Collections, as one form of commemoration for the traumatic outcomes of the Tuscarora War three hundred years prior.⁷ Lopenzina's institution, Old Dominion University is situated in Virginia's Tidewater region, which he describes as "ground zero in regards to English settlement on this continent" (5) given the presence



of Jamestown and local namesakes reflecting the stories of that early colony such as Pocahontas Street, Powhatan Avenue, and Matoaka Avenue (5). Lopenzina notes the ways he discusses both Virginia's Indigenous history and its contemporary Indigenous peoples, and when I read his essay, I think about the ways that teaching Indigenous literatures in Virginia and North Carolina have similar challenges because of the weight of English colonial mythologies that have so long hung over these spaces.

Yet despite the heaviness of colonial mythologies, they do not mark the beginning of the Southeast's Indigenous literatures. Oral traditions continue as they have for millenia and sometimes find their way into books, as do the Choctaw oral traditions LeAnne Howe shares such as "The Unknown Woman" (32-33) and "the story of the hunter who became a deer" (35) in her essay "The Story of America." Horatio Bardwell Cushman transcribed "Ohoyo Chishba Osh"⁸ or "The Unknown Woman" and published it in *The History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians* in 1899. Howe drew inspiration from that text to write short dramatic pieces that appeared in both her creative collection, *Evidence of Red*, and historian, Greg O'Brien's essay collection, *Pre-removal Choctaw History: Exploring New Paths*. Ethnologist James Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokees*, first published in 1900, has also provided fodder for Native writers, such as Cherokee Nation novelist, Blake Hausman, who discusses his use of Mooney's collection for his futuristic novel, *Riding the Trail of Tears*, in a recent interview with me and Miriam Brown Spiers. Hausman explains, "I had all these sticky notes, dozens of sticky notes, and writings in the margin... While the Mooney book was not the only thing that I drew on, it was certainly part of what I was drawing on to reclaim and mobilize some old school stories" (57). Hausman also discusses his inner conflicts about using a white ethnologist's early twentieth century collection as a source text for a book that plays with Cherokee history, describing it as a "paradox" (56).



James Mooney worked for the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology as a salvage ethnologist, his work predicated on the idea that Indigenous peoples' cultures were quickly being eradicated (Duncan 17). That said, his work is valued by the Eastern Cherokees, as explained by Sarah Muse Isaacs:

[Mooney's] collection, though problematic for a number of reasons, is the most extensive set of translations from Cherokee to English of the oral offerings of Cherokee storytellers from the Eastern Band to date... The modern storytellers with whom I have worked have each referred to Mooney's *Cherokee History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas* at various times through their artistic careers for clarification or simply to compare the written version of a story with the spoken one that they themselves learned from their mentors. (20)

Isaacs's, *Eastern Cherokee Stories: a Living Oral Tradition and Its Cultural Continuance* (2019), along with Barbara Duncan's *Living Stories of the Cherokee* (1998) and Christopher Teuton's *Cherokee Stories of the Turtle Island Liars' Club* (2012), represent more recent turns in the collection of oral literatures, emphasizing their continuance. These collections also highlight the collaborative nature of collecting stories, such as Duncan's "oral poetics" approach, which attempts to emulate the oral elements of the stories (23). Both Teuton and Isaacs center Cherokee epistemologies as a means of framing the stories in their collections. Teuton contends that Cherokee storytelling/lying, or *gagoga*, is an integral part of communication within the Cherokee community, or *sgadug* ("Indigenous Textuality" 134), while Isaacs reads Cherokee storytelling through the concepts of *Gadugi*, in which individuals "come together as one and [help] one another" (26) and *Duyvhta*, "the right path to walk and live" (28). In addition to the oral tradition, non-alphabetic texts are another example of how Indigenous Southeasterners have told stories. Eric Gary Anderson discusses how "Native cultures in the South and elsewhere were richly multitextual and intertextual long before European landfall" (18) in "Literary and Textual Histories of the Native



South.” Anderson’s essay explores texts such as wampum belts, tally sticks, and hatched trees used as trail or boundary markers, drawing from anthropological and historical work by Robbie Etheridge, Angela Pulley Hudson, Nancy Shoemaker, and others. He also discusses earthworks and the oral stories associated with them as they appear in contemporary writers’ works including those by LeAnne Howe and Geary Hobson. Howe extensively examines mound sites and their relationship to tribalography in a more recent development of her theory, “embodied tribalography,” describing this idea’s evolution as connected to her research on ancient ballfields and mounds while writing her novel, *Miko Kings: an Indian Baseball Story*. Embodied tribalography suggests that “tribal peoples may embody the land from which they come” (Squint 127), and Howe uses the creation of Bird Mound in Poverty Point, Louisiana, built over three millenia ago, as a central example of this process.⁹ Howe asserts “that the people who came together, from many directions, to write the story of Bird Mound into the land must have considered her an important symbol for their communities” (“Embodied Tribalography: First Installment” 181). Embodied tribalography is part of a turn toward land-based epistemologies in twenty-first century Indigenous studies, forms of which can be seen the work of Citizen Potawatomi scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer, Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Yellow Knives Dene political scientist Glen Coulthard.¹⁰

Part II: Tribalography as Methodology

In March of 2022, I flew to New Orleans to attend the Center for the Study of the Gulf South’s Indigenous Studies Symposium at Tulane University. It was just a few weeks after Mardi Gras, and the live oaks of the city were hung decadently with purple, gold, green, and silver beads, leftovers from the parades of the season. As my taxi

meandered through the narrow streets near campus, I saw students throwing footballs and lounging in the verdant green lawns of spring in the Crescent City.

When I arrived at a nineteenth-century mansion-turned-hotel on St. Charles Avenue, I saw LeAnne Howe seated at a table on the wide verandah, sipping water and writing in a journal. Before I exited the taxi and began the drudgery of toting luggage and checking in, I took a photograph in my mind of that moment, the fashionably dressed, bespectacled writer with a shiny, short black bob, *à la* the silent film star Louise Brooks, after whom she had patterned the style of her character Adair, in *Shell Shaker*. Howe had worked in the securities industry in the 1980s and spent long periods of time living in New Orleans, also like Adair. I have often wondered how much Howe's characters are patterned after her own life, such as when Adair looks out at the Mississippi River from her 11th floor office and thinks, "[She] can't imagine living anywhere else but New Orleans, where so much Choctaw history occurred," and yet she also says, "there remains no trace of her people" (41). I suspect that 1980s New Orleans may have felt that way for an Oklahoma Choctaw woman working in the cutthroat field of bond brokerage, long before the era of Bvlbancha Liberation Radio¹¹ or the Nanih Bvlbancha,¹² a mound built by a coalition of the city's Indigenous peoples in 2024. "Bvlbancha" means "place of other tongues" (Tulane Land Acknowledgement) and is the Choctaw name for the ancient trading place we now call by the anglicized version (New Orleans) of its French colonial name (La Nouvelle-Orléans).

Howe was the writer who had set my imagination afire, and I thirsted to learn about the Gulf South homelands of the Choctaw people when I first read *Shell Shaker* in 2006, as a doctoral student at Louisiana State University. Because of Howe's work, I began to research the Choctaw placenames around me—Bogue Chitto (*bok chitto*), Bogalusa (*bok lusa*), Atchafalaya (*hacha falaya*)—and learn about the cultures that had been obfuscated first by Spanish and French colonialism, and later by U.S. settler colonialism.¹³ One of my earliest peer-reviewed works is an interview I conducted with Howe in 2008, and published in 2010, my first monograph (2018) was my single-author



study of Howe's work, and just the month before our meeting in New Orleans, my edited collection of interviews with Howe had been published. Her writing has been central to my research for most of my career, and I was thrilled to be co-presenting with her at Tulane's conference.

Those days in New Orleans were filled with amazing food and the strange freedom of the post-vaccination phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. What I remember most, however, is the reception that Howe received from a contingent of Gulf South tribal peoples attending the conference, especially a Choctaw Nation citizen working for the Mississippi Band of Choctaws who had enthusiastically read her work. The week previous to the conference in New Orleans, I spoke at an event at the University of Oklahoma, celebrating the donation of Howe's archive to the university's Western History Collection. There I saw Choctaw and other tribal peoples honoring her contributions to Native American literature. What I realized in New Orleans was that LeAnne Howe's writing is, in a way, reuniting Choctaw peoples from Oklahoma and Mississippi and Louisiana, those who have been divided by the ethnic cleansing of 19th century Indian Removal, much like her character Delores Love, in *Shell Shaker*. In the novel's climactic scene, Delores leads a ceremony at the Nanih Waiya to bury Red Shoes/Red McAlester the corrupt chief who caused the Choctaws so much trouble in both the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, a ceremony that involves the participation of women from "Zwolle, Louisiana; Homa [sic], Louisiana; Lexington, Texas, and Mobile, Alabama" (196). The hopeful symbolism of Delores's role is clear: "She exhales, pushing all herself out of her body and, in this moment, she feels a miraculous beginning as she and the other Chahta women of the Southeast join hands and sing" (197). The optimism that I read into this passage has counterpoints, such as Melanie Benson Taylor's interpretation which asks if rather than being a "new beginning" the Nanih Waiya scene is actually "just another revolution in an uncannily

repetitive and cruel history?" (64), given that Delores and her husband, Isaac Billy, are killed by the Mafia shortly after the ceremony. I have previously argued that the novel privileges the actions of spirits and that the self-sacrifices by both Delores and Isaac are intentional, designed to protect future generations from the spirit of the *Osano* (bloodsucker) chief. It is this futurist element of that scene which I find particularly intriguing, given the text's desire to reunite the Choctaws across time and space and can be understood through Cherokee Nation scholar Daniel Heath Justice's concept of "[imagining] otherwise" (156). In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Justice asks the question, "How do we become good ancestors?" (113). For Justice, one of the ways to do this is through Indigenous literature that "articulates and even anticipates our potential for transformational change, if only we bring to it the best of our imaginative selves. Freedom of love, of desire, of life, culture, and political survival—these are only realized through the link of our courage to our imaginations. We can't possibly live otherwise until we first *imagine* otherwise," (156), as LeAnne Howe has done in *Shell Shaker*.

On my return flight to North Carolina from the conference at Tulane, I continued to read the book I was teaching my undergraduate Native American literature students at the time, Joy Harjo's most recent autobiography, *Poet Warrior*, written during the Muscogee Creek author's tenure as the first Native American Poet Laureate of the United States. I found Harjo's descriptions of her many mentors (a diverse group including her mother, Creek poet Alexander Posey, Emily Dickinson, and Audre Lorde), compelling as an exploration of artistic development; however, it was the description of her long-term relationship with the writer and activist, Meridel Le Sueur, that resonated deeply with me. Harjo met Le Sueur when she was an undergraduate student at the University of New Mexico and began a relationship through letters, phone calls, and visits until the elder writer's death in 1996 (167-174). The memoir makes clear that Harjo values Le Sueur's proletarian, feminist work, but her poignant stories about their friendship, such as when Harjo picked up Le Sueur at a bus station



in Iowa City with her children in tow, made me begin to think about the ways that my academic interest in Howe's work had evolved into something on a deeper emotional level. I remember visiting Howe in Athens, Georgia, in 2016, to attend a party she hosted, celebrating the publication of a new book by her colleague at the University of Georgia and my dissertation director, John Lowe, and sharing with her my grief about losing my mother in my early thirties. She told me that I could still talk to my mother, that she is still here. Howe's writing, especially her novels, *Shell Shaker* and *Miko Kings* and her play-in-verse, *Savage Conversations*, make clear the thin boundary between the living and the dead and the ways that spirits can interact with the living; this is a theme that reverberates throughout the works of various Indigenous literary and cultural productions, including in the recent and highly-acclaimed television series, *Reservation Dogs*, set in Oklahoma and featuring a small community on Muscogee Creek tribal lands. In "The Story of America," Howe shares a story her grandmother told her about the death of her neighbor, Lum Jones, who was carried "toward the heavens" by the Angel of Death, which Howe described as a "bird-man" (31). She explains, "Of course, everyone in my family agreed that right after Grandmother saw Lum Jones being carried up through the tree, he was as dead as Andrew Jackson. It was a fact. Grandmother could see life and death, and she told me not to be afraid of either one. That was the first lesson I learned from her" (31).

So, what do these reflections on my relationship with a writer whose work has deeply shaped my own have to do with tribalogy as methodology? Howe's most well-known definition of the term appears in "The Story of America":

Native stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film history), seem to pull all the elements together of a storyteller's tribe, meaning the people, the land, and multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and

future milieus (present and future milieus mean non-Indians). I have tried to show that tribalography comes from the Native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another. (42)

"The Story of America" is itself a tribalography, form following function, in which Howe "connects one thing to another" such as the stories told to her by her grandmother linked to the scientific theory of symbiogenesis, which she suggests is a "Choctawan way of looking at the world" (34). The essay demonstrates the validation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (well before the term was regularly used) through its multiple examples of "scientific discovery" confirming what Indigenous stories have long held to be true, despite such stories being denigrated by Westerners as "myths" (37). This idea scaffolds her points about the ways that the story of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy informed the founding ideologies of what became the United States. Howe explains "that the Haudenosaunee's *story of their union* created an image so powerful in the minds of colonists that they believed if 'savages' could unite they ought to be able to do the same thing" (41-42). Howe's essay also contains compelling literary analyses of two Native-authored texts, Irvin Morris's (Diné), *The Glittering World* and Mona Susan Power's (Dakota) *The Grass Dancer*. Regarding Morris's collection of stories, Howe notes "What is most significant about [his] work is that while he is telling specific Navajo tribal history, culture, and his own revelatory stories, he also regards this textual space as a contemplative reflection of identity. What does it mean to be Navajo, but to connect with people who are not?" (44). Of Power's novel, Howe underscores "connections between Dakota ancestors and the present-day culture... Time travels counterclockwise, and there are multiple narrators giving their versions of events. This creates a multigenerational story that touches all the characters in the book" (44). These representations of connections between Natives and non-Natives and Indigenous ancestors and contemporary tribal members, or of time moving counterclockwise, multiple narrators, and multigenerational storytelling are all also



elements one can easily find in most of LeAnne Howe's work. Howe has also pointed out the multi-modal nature of tribalography in further discussions of the concept such as in her interview with Jeremy Reed, in which she described it as "the way American Indians tell stories—in multiple genres" (90).

To read the "Native South" as a tribalography might seem easy on the surface: the U.S. Southeast is a geographically and culturally diverse region in which connections, whether between original Muscogean, Siouan, Algonquian, and Iroquoian peoples or between European, African, and Indigenous groups, have been and continue to be made. For me, as a settler scholar, the challenge of navigating "present and future milieus" ("The Story of America" 42) is to avoid replicating colonialist methods. I can see the connections between regions, literatures, and peoples, but to attempt to write a tribalography means to take a leap outside of the false objectivity of traditional Western scholarly discourse—cognizant of my position as a settler descended from German, English, and Scots-Irish immigrants whose family entered what became Kentucky as a result of the Treaty of Tellico with the Cherokee Nation—to try to read through an Indigenous lens.¹⁴ As Howe made the point that stories themselves, whether they are told by her grandmother, herself, or are a part of Haudenosaunee oral tradition, are important to a theory of Indigenous storytelling, I am making the point that my multi-modal stories about LeAnne Howe's significant impact on contemporary Native literature and scholarship (including on this scholar's work) can help us understand "past, present, and future milieus" of the Native South. To answer the question I posed at the beginning of the previous paragraph, my reflections on my relationship with LeAnne Howe demonstrate her role as mentor, friend, and confidante to me as I try to redefine the "South," on both an intellectual and personal level, in order to evoke change from my multiple positions as a settler, as a scholar, and as a teacher. When I read about Harjo's relationship with Meridel LeSeur—

with its letters and conversations and dancing and professional advice and laughter and tears—I thought instantly of my relationship with LeAnne Howe—with its emails and texts and conversations and dinners and professional advice and laughter and tears – an embodied connection that has taught me more than words on the page or lectures from a podium.

To date, both *Shell Shaker* and *Miko Kings* have been analyzed tribalographically, as has Howe's collection *Evidence of Red*. Her work has also been read through the lens of embodied tribalography.¹⁵ The 2014 issue of *Studies in American Indian Literature*, edited by Joseph Bauerkemper, explored the versatility of tribalography beyond Howe's own work, including how it might be used to counter settler ideologies in the classroom and how scholars might use it as critical methodology. In his article in this special issue of *SAIL*, White Earth Anishinaabe descendant Carter Meland compares students in Native American literature courses in "majority culture institutions in the United States" to Schrodinger's cat, "in a superposed state" (26). Unlike the famous cat of quantum physics experimentation, however, such students are not in an "alive-dead" state; rather, they are simultaneously "colonialist-decolonized" (26) with the "potential of both" (26). Meland sees Howe's essay, "The Story of America" as "a valuable tool in realizing the decolonizing potential within our students" (26) for the way it "questions colonialist authority" and "seeks to share authority between the various genres of writing that appear in [it]" (30). In her article, "Making It Work: a Model of Tribalography as Methodology," White Earth Anishinaabeg scholar Jill Doerfler explores how tribalography can be a key to an "ethical Native literary criticism" by balancing "rights and responsibilities via a system of relationships... which necessitate reciprocity" (65). Such a methodology can reflect the importance of "[understanding] the relationship between scholarship and the real life experiences of Natives" (65) for the discipline of American Indian Studies. Poet and critic Dean Rader has gone so far as to argue that "tribalography is the most significant theory of American Indigenous writing to emerge in the last twenty years—maybe ever"



(vii). In our co-authored chapter on *Shell Shaker* in *Postindian Aesthetics: Affirming Indigenous Literary Sovereignty*, Kenneth Roemer and I noted that Howe's theory of tribalography sets her alongside Gerald Vizenor and N. Scott Momaday as "among the few Native novelists and poets who have written influential theoretical manifestos" (69).¹⁶

Beyond Howe's oeuvre, few works by Southeastern Indigenous writers have been read through the lens of tribalography. In the spirit of Howe's approach of storytelling, theoretical postulation, and critical analysis in "The Story of America," I have selected Joy Harjo's 2019 collection, *An American Sunrise*, as an example of an Indigenous Southeastern text which can be analyzed through a tribalographic lens, given its form and its fluid movement through time. Harjo's book is collection of poetry, memories, trickster and origin tales, and archival documents that tell the stories of Creek Removal, Southeastern returns, origins, mournings, and blessings. Like "The Story of America," *An American Sunrise* "questions colonialist authority" (Meland 30) in its resistance to settler stories about Southeastern Natives, particularly stories about nineteenth century Indian Removal. The text is also notable for Harjo's nods to the writers and artists who inspire her, such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Emily Dickinson, and T.C. Cannon. The titular poem, "was written first in response to a call for Golden Shovel poems, a form initiated by Terrance Hayes to honor Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry" (Harjo, "Singing"). In "An American Sunrise," the last words of each line are phrases in Gwendolyn Brooks's highly anthologized "We Real Cool." As in Brooks's poem, Harjo's repetition of the word, "we," highlights community elements that involve playing pool, listening to jazz, and drinking gin. Harjo notes that the poem is connected to her own interest in "Muskogean Indigenous peoples in the origin story of blues and jazz" (Harjo, "Singing").

Though *An American Sunrise* is rich for an extended tribalographic reading, my focus will be on those poems that depict aspects of Harjo's family's experience leaving traditional Creek lands in what becomes Alabama with her own return to the Southeast when she lives in Knoxville, Tennessee. The text sinuously moves back and forth in time, its prologue an explanation of how Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act which led to the "deportation," as historian Claudio Saunt describes this "assault on indigenous sovereignty" (xiv), of thousands of Southeastern Natives. Harjo notes that there existed "many trails of tears of tribal nations all over North America of indigenous peoples who were forcibly removed from their homelands by government forces" linking that experience to "indigenous peoples who are making their way up from the southern hemisphere" as a "continuation of the Trail of Tears" (xv); Harjo's rhetorical move underscores tribalographic connection-making through the continued and unjust trans-Indigenous¹⁷ dispossession of land. It also complicates the only story of Indian Removal known by most majority culture U.S. citizens: Cherokee people walking across a dangerous and frozen landscape in the winter of 1838-1839. The final line of the prologue, "May we all find the way home" speaks to how the collection will not only be a tribute to her own Creek ancestors but also a far-reaching and inclusive homage to the land itself, of which we are all a part, as seen in the final poem, "Bless this Land." Howe's vision of the possibilities of tribalography for consensus building are epitomized in the ending of "Bless this Land," when Harjo riffs on Woody Guthrie: "These lands aren't our lands. These lands aren't your lands. We are this land" (108). Natives and non-Natives are defined as the land, sacred and unownable.

Following the prologue, Harjo includes a map of Creek Removal, with this caption: "This is only one trail. There were many trails of tears from the homelands of the Muscogee Creek Nation west, just as there were for the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Seminole, and many other tribal nations" (xvi). Harjo notes in the book's acknowledgments that this map comes from Christopher Haveman's 2018 monograph, *Bending Their Way Onward: Creek Indian Removal in the Documents*.



Haveman's book contains a total of fifteen maps of the routes taken from Alabama to Indian Territory by the Creeks from the period of 1827-1837, including "voluntary" and "forced" journeys which he describes variously including as "emigrations," "removals," and relocations" (iii-iv), with some overland Removals but also many water Removals via southeastern rivers and the Gulf of Mexico.

One of the ways that *An American Sunrise* tribalographically engages with ancestors is through the story of Harjo's grandfather Monahwee Okfuskee, a Red Stick chief, whose Removal to Indian Territory began on September 17, 1836, with Detachment 3. Harjo notes that Detachment 3 "was conducted to Indian Territory by Dr. R.W. Williams on behalf of the Alabama Emigrating Company" (46). In *Bending Their Way Onward*, Haveman explains that "the Alabama Emigrating Company was composed largely of land speculators, many of whom had cheated the Creeks out of their reserves" (244). The "Journal of Occurrences" maintained by Lieutenant Edward Deas, included in Haveman's book, tracked the journey of Detachment 3 from their departure from Talladega, Alabama, on September 17, 1836, to their arrival at Ft. Gibson on January 23, 1837. Detachment 3's was mostly an overland journey, but Deas spends a good deal of time documenting what occurs during its Mississippi River crossing, the preparations for which commenced on November 1. That day began the "operation for ferrying Indian Horses and Ponies across the Mississippi" (316), and by November 6, the majority of the 2,696 Creeks in the detachment (308) and their belongings had been loaded onto boats. Deas notes that "Two of the Chiefs have refused to go by water as many of the Indians have a prejudice against steam boats" (317), one of whom was Harjo's ancestor, Monahwee. It was decided that a group of Creeks led by Monahwee¹⁸ and Tuscoona Hadjo would meet up with the rest of the detachment on the far bank of the White River in Arkansas where the boats would land after journeying south on the Mississippi and then up the smaller tributary. The reunion

of the detachment turned out to be a slow process that occurred at various points along the journey across Arkansas, but the disparate groups were finally completely reunited in early January in between Little Rock and Ft. Gibson.

The chiefs' "prejudice against steam boats" was well founded, as evidenced by the story of Sin-e-cha, which Harjo includes in a piece called "Mvskoke Mourning Song" in *An American Sunrise*. Sin-e-cha was aboard the steamboat *Monmouth*, which sunk in the Mississippi River in October of 1837. "Mvskoke Mourning Song" is found poetry from an interview with Elsie Edwards in a 1937 issue of *Indian-Pioneer History*. Harjo's piece focuses on the oral tradition embedded in Sin-e-cha's story, her song of Removal: "I have no more land. I am driven away from home, driven up the red waters, let us all go, let us all die together and somewhere upon the banks we will be there" (51). Edwards includes the heart-wrenching detail that Sin-e-cha's song was sung by others onboard the *Monmouth* when it sank. Haveman describes how the steamboat was traveling with six others up the Mississippi from New Orleans, when it took a western route around Profit Island, just north of Baton Rouge, instead of taking the eastern route that it should have. Another steamboat crashed into it, causing the cabin to detach from the hull and the boat to sink (225-226). Approximately 300 hundred of the 700 onboard, mostly Creek refugees, died in the accident. According to Yvonne Lewis Day, of the Baton Rouge Genealogical and Historical Society, most of the bodies of those who died in the crash washed ashore near Port Allen and were buried in unmarked, mass graves (Bethencourt). These water crossings of Mvskoke peoples in Harjo's *An American Sunrise* underscore the complex undertaking that was Southeastern Indian Removal. Boat voyages across the Gulf of Mexico were as much of a Trail of Tears as were the overland journeys, and New Orleans played a prominent role, alongside Memphis, for Mississippi River embarkations.

An American Sunrise, like *Shell Shaker*, operates as a "form of strategic counter-Removal" (Anderson, "On Native Ground") by a contemporary Native writer whose ancestors were forced from their homelands by the Indian Removal Act. Such a textual



“counter-Removal” operates in the same way that Meland suggests Howe’s “The Story of America” does: by “[questioning] colonialist authority” and “[sharing] authority between the various genres of writing that appear in [it]” (30). Some of the poetry in the text was presumably written during Harjo’s tenure as endowed chair at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, such as “Exile of Memory” which describes a return to the Southeast. This return is one of trepidation, as the speaker begins, “Do not return,/We were warned by one who knows things/You will only upset the dead” (6). Despite such fears, the speaker describes the first night in a “condo above the Tennessee River,” during which “Those who continued to keep the land/Despite the imposition of newcomers/And the forced exile of our relatives/All night, they welcomed us/All night, the stomp dancers/All night, the shell shakers/All night circle after circle made a spiral/To the Milky Way” (8). Harjo’s poem demonstrates the possibility of Southeastern Indigenous returns through its depiction of welcoming ancestor spirits, despite the generations of trauma caused by Removal. This act of creating poetry out of genocide is much like an iron pot Harjo describes in both her free verse poem “Washing My Mother’s Body” in *An American Sunrise* and in her memoir, *Poet Warrior*. In the poem, an extended metaphor for spiritual caretaking, the speaker describes the iron pot: “My mother had the iron pot given to her by her Cherokee grandmother,/whose mother gave it to her, given to her by the U.S. government/on the Trail of Tears./She grew flowers in it” (31). Harjo’s creations are the flowers of intergenerational trauma, and they teach us something about the history of Indian Removal in the Southeast and about its successes and failures. This interconnection of history and poetry and memories and trickster tales and blessings demonstrates the relevance of a tribalographic approach because as Howe explains, “the landscape of Native stories may remain just beyond the grasp of the reader if the

stories are pressed into narrow categories of what is fiction and what is historical truth" ("The Story of America" 46).

Part III: *Nukfokechi*

LeAnne Howe's work often weaves Choctaw language into English, and I have previously written about the ways that her stories, novels, poems, and plays "Choctalk."¹⁹ This idea is derived from her usage of the phrase, "Choctalking on Other Realities," the title of a short story in her collection *Evidence of Red* first published in 2005, a one-woman play performed at the University of Illinois in 2009, and her 2013 award-winning memoir/travelogue, and I define it as a form of "cultural coding, the way in which one can speak or express through a Choctaw worldview" (5). Howe Choctalks in "The Story of America" in which she discusses the term *nukfokechi* to make a point about the relationship between language and creation. This relationship between language and creation is the central theme of the essay: that the U.S. founders heard a story told about nation-building by Indigenous peoples and created the story of their own nation. Howe suggests that it is important to understand *nukfokechi* in order to understand tribalography:

Before I continue with the scholarly account of tribalography, I want to tell you a Choctaw story. My tribe's language has a mysterious prefix that when combined with other words represents a form of creation. It is *nuk* or *nok*, and it has to do with the power of speech, breath, and mind. Things with *nok* or *nuk* attached to them are so powerful they create. For instance, *nukfokechi* brings forth knowledge and inspiration. A teacher is *nukfoki*, the beginning of action. *Nuklibisha* is to be in a state of passion, and *nukficholi* means to hiccup, or breath that comes out accidentally. (30)²⁰

Howe, herself, is *nukfoki*, teaching us a form of Indigenous critical methodology. As previously noted, Howe has described the term "Native South" as "a fiction," ("It's About Story"), and I would argue that fiction is much like the United States in "The Story of



America," a story inspired by, but not created by, Native peoples. The question then becomes, how do we decolonize our readings of Southeastern Indigenous literatures? Tribalography is, of course, one way, as I have attempted to demonstrate in my reading of *An American Sunrise* here.

Given Howe's own reliance on Choctaw language in her body of work, we might also consider hermeneutic approaches that privilege Indigenous knowledge through tribal languages. One example is reading Cherokee writers through epistemological constructs such as *Gadugi*, as Mae Miller Claxton has done with Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle's essays²¹ and as Sarah Muse Isaacs has done in her interpretation of the tribe's oral stories. Chickasaw theorist Jodi Byrd has argued that *yakni patafa*, Chickasaw for "split" or "furrowed land" provides a critical praxis to "provide some deeper understanding toward the continual return of exegesis" in which exists the possibility of Indigenous peoples' returns to Southeastern "spaces as agentic participants capable of determining their own pasts and futures beyond those of the vested and occupying nation-states" ("A Return to the South" 619). *Yakni patafa* stands in contrast to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County in which "the prior presence" of Natives peoples, as Byrd notes, "[is required] to locate his own authority to write convincingly and compellingly about the place" ("Souths as Prologues" 18). In LeAnne Howe's *Miko Kings: an Indian Baseball Story*, the early twentieth century physicist protagonist Ezol Day, writes a theoretical paper arguing that Choctaw and European Americans experienced time and space differently, based on the way Choctaws represent time linguistically. Day's theory is exemplified through the word, *okchamali*, meaning "both blue and green," which she argues signifies "life," considering that it might also refer to "the blue and green swamplands" of the origin place of the Choctaw peoples and attributes a temporal aspect to the word: "*Okchamali* could be a description of a place name of a primeval epoch when the sky and the sea were so

close that there was almost no atmosphere in between... *Okchamali* then becomes a descriptive remnant, the color of a time that the ancient Choctaws experienced" (38). Ezol Day further explains that the temporal aspects of the language rely on verbs: "We have evidence in our language that our people experienced other dimensions through our use of particles and verbs which attend to specific movements in and out of spacetime" (39). I would suggest that it is possible to consider this idea outside of the bounds of Howe's novel. If we can read the blue-green swamplands of the Gulf South through *okchamali*, in its temporal and material aspects, what might we learn about how to exist in such spaces? How to live in the Gulf South is a question that is explored in the writing, photography, and documentary film of Houma artist and activist, Monique Verdin, whose body of work would be rich for consideration within the linguistic and temporal framework of *okchamali*.

The significance of language as cultural key is explored in Robin Wall Kimmerer's bestselling essay collection, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Kimmerer recounts her challenges learning to speak Potawatomi from various sources including an in-person class led by the nine remaining elders who fluently speak the language at the annual tribal gathering, in an online language revitalization class, and from an Ojibwe dictionary. She is deeply moved by one of the elders who explained the urgency of learning Potawatomi: "It's not just the words that will be lost... The language is the heart of our culture; it holds our thoughts, our way of seeing the world. It's too beautiful for English to explain" (50). Despite her desire to learn, Kimmerer struggles with a language comprised of seventy percent verbs, noting, "70 percent of the words have to be conjugated, and 70 percent have different tenses and cases to be mastered" (53). She also explains other differences from English: "Potawatomi does not divide the world into masculine and feminine" and "[nouns] and verbs both are animate and inanimate" (53). At one point, even though she knows her tribe's language is nearly extinct because of settler colonial practices that include the inhumane punishment of



Potawatomi-speaking children in boarding schools such as literally washing their mouths out with soap (50), she is so overwhelmed by the linguistic difficulty that she is ready to quit her studies (53). What nearly stops Kimmerer is what she names “the grammar of animacy,” as she tries to understand how the word “bay,” a body of water as understood in English, could be a verb. Then she has a revelation that she describes as “[hearing] the zap of synapses firing” (55) and elaborates in this way:

In that moment I could smell the water of the bay, watch it rock against the shore and hear it sift into the sand. A bay is a noun only if water is *dead*... But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to be a bay—releases the bay from its bondage and lets it live. ‘To be a bay’ holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that too. (55)

Kimmerer realizes that the grammar of animacy is what she has needed to describe her experiences in the woods as a botanist. She says, “this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us. And the vestiges of boarding schools, the soap-wielding missionary wraiths, hang their heads in defeat” (55). Kimmerer’s example demonstrates the connectedness of Indigenous languages and, therefore Indigenous cultures, to the earth, both land and water, a concept that is akin to LeAnne Howe’s vision of embodied tribalography.

The “Native South” is a story, a “fiction” (69) as Howe calls it, one that has been created to organize academic ideas about Indigenous peoples in today’s U.S. Southeast. The term may or may not be embraced by scholars and writers, Native and non-Native; regardless, it can only give us the briefest glimpse of the land and its peoples because it is an exterior classification, one that limits the subjectivity of discrete

tribal nations and individual citizens. Can we lose the label and listen more closely to diverse Indigenous languages and cultural productions, especially their expressions of kinship, their connections with peoples and lands and waters, or as Howe describes it, "the Native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another" (42)? In the U.S. Southeast, it is certain that we must "[reckon]" (Saunt xix) with the history and legacy of Indian Removal, including its silencings, its dispersals, and its contemporary returns. As Claudio Saunt has noted in *Unworthy Republic: the Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory*, such a reckoning never happened (xix), but I believe it is one of many decolonial moves necessary within the academy and beyond for an ethical Indigenous literary praxis, and perhaps, the means to "imagine otherwise" in these lands and waters, previously and still, home to Muscogean, Siouan, Algonquian, and Iroquoian peoples.

Notes

¹ See LeAnne Howe at the *Intersection of Southern and Native American Literature*.

² See Melanie Benson Taylor's discussion of LeAnne Howe's work in *Reconstructing the Native South: American Indian Literature and the Lost Cause* (24).

³ See *The People Who Stayed: Southeastern Indian Writing after Removal* edited Hobson, McAdams, and Walkiewicz (19).

⁴ See also Caison's *Red States* on the topic of "white southern nativism" (3).

⁵ Such references to "Native Southerners" can be found in spaces as diverse as Elizabeth Ellis's 2023 monograph *The Great Power of Small Nations: Indigenous Diplomacy in the Gulf South*, a fall 2024 exhibit at UNC-Pembroke's Museum of the Southeast American Indian entitled "Native South Community Art Show," or Dr. Marvin Richardon's 2019 lecture at East Carolina University's Indigenous People's Day event.

⁶ <https://lwcc.ecu.edu/indigenous-land-acknowledgement/#:~:text=We%20acknowledge%20the%20Tuscarora%20people,and%20air%20that%20Greenville%20consumes.>

⁷ <https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/65926>



⁸ According to John DePriest (Choctaw Nation), a linguist at Tulane University, “Ohoyo Chishba Osh” is an unusual construction, and that “most people refer to her as *Ohoyo Osh Chishba*” which roughly translates as “woman who is unknown.”

⁹ See also Chadwick Allen’s *Earthworks Rising: Mound Building in Native Literature and Arts* for a discussion of his collaboration with Howe and his own readings of Indigenous earthworks through an embodied tribalographic lens.

¹⁰ See *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation,” and *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*.

¹¹ Bulbancha Liberation Radio is an “Indigenous led micro-grid communication and collective power building station based in Bulbancha,” per its website: <https://www.bvlbancharadio.net/>.

¹² <https://nanihbvlbancha.net/>

¹³ *Yakoke* to John DePriest for insights about Choctaw language and its epistemological groundings.

¹⁴ The practice I am describing is not uncommon. In the field of Native American and Indigenous studies, there are several examples of settler scholars privileging Indigenous epistemologies. An early example is James Cox’s *Muting White Noise: Native American and European Novel Traditions* (2006) and more recently, Anne Stewart’s *Angry Planet: Decolonial Fiction and the American Third World* (2022).

¹⁵ See Bauerkemper, Horan and Kim, Squint (*LeAnne Howe at the Intersections of Southern and Native American Literature*) and Howe (“Embodied Tribalography”).

¹⁶ Craig Womack and Daniel Heath Justice are also important Indigenous fiction writers who have written landmark theoretical pieces.

¹⁷ See Chadwick Allen’s *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Study*.

¹⁸ Haveman uses alternate spellings including Monawee and Menawa. Harjo notes that “Menawa” is a variation of her ancestor’s name (*An American Sunrise* 5).

¹⁹ See Ch. 1 of *LeAnne Howe at the Intersection of Southern and Native American Literature*

²⁰ DePriest notes that *nukfokechi* “seems to be more ‘a reminder’ than a teacher.” I suspect that Howe was using the term as defined Cyrus Byington’s *A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language* (294).

²¹ See *North Carolina Literary Review*’s 2023 special feature section focused on Native American literature of North Carolina, edited by Squint.

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ARTICLE

Lynn Riggs's Comedies

ALEXANDER PETTIT & JAMES H. COX

The Cherokee Nation playwright Lynn Riggs (1899–1954) was recognized in his day primarily as a comic dramatist.¹ His comedies appeared on Broadway and college campuses and in Little Theatres, repertory houses, and summer stock.² They earned him a good income, for a time, and helped make him famous, a presence in society columns as well as on drama pages. Much of his status owed to *Russet Mantle*, which triumphed on Broadway in 1936 before playing in venues around the country. Several earlier plays had signaled Riggs's comic talents: the unpublished apprentice play *Cuckoo* (1922), *Knives from Syria* (1925), *Roadside* (1930), and *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931). All five plays adapt venerable comic traditions, the modernist revamping of which also engaged, for example, Eugene O'Neill, foremost in Riggs's esteem among his contemporary dramatists.³ Riggs's comedies also link their author to other comic Indigenous writers from his birthplace in Indian Territory, including Alexander Posey (Creek Nation; 1873–1908) and Will Rogers (Cherokee Nation; 1879–1935); to Indigenous comedians from Charlie Hill (Oneida Nation; 1951-2013) to the 1491s; and to Indigenous dramatists of the present day such as Larissa FastHorse (Sicangu Lakota)

and Drew Hayden Taylor (Curve Lake First Nation Ojibway).⁴ We build here on our own recent publications and on foundational scholarship by Craig Womack, Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation), and Kirby Brown (Cherokee Nation) that focus on Riggs's bleaker and more violent Indigenous-specific plays. We propose here a second, parallel artistic trajectory for Riggs that moves to, through, and past *Russet Mantle*, his most conventional comedy and his most successful Broadway production. By expanding the current academic view of the first professional Indigenous dramatist's career, we begin to account for the full range of his artistic labor and dogged attempts to find a voice, including a comedic one, that appealed to a broad audience; to situate Riggs more precisely in Native American and US literary histories; and to respond to Vine Deloria Jr's (Yankton Dakota) lament "that the humorous side of Indian life has not been mentioned by the professed experts in Indian Affairs" (146) by enshrining in the critical record Riggs's sense of humor.

Russet Mantle almost did not make it into rehearsal. In December 1935, years into the Depression, a "broke" Riggs had to ask his loyal friend Joan Crawford for a loan of \$2,500—more than \$55,000 in 2024 currency—to help finance the production (Riggs to Crawford).⁵ Thanks in part to Crawford's generosity, *Russet Mantle* opened at Broadway's Theatre Masque on January 16, 1936, with Cherokee actress Evelyn Varden (1893–1958) in the important role of Susanna Kincaid. Riggs was not in the audience. The actress, artist, labor activist, suffragist, and Provincetown Player Ida Rauh, an enduring ally and patron, attended in his place. One week later, Riggs checked out of the Hotel St. Moritz at 50 Central Park South—"New York's most continental hotel," according to the syndicated columnist George Tucker—just down from 55th Street, which had become "something of a nocturnal parade ground for celebrities" ("Man"). He boarded the luxurious 20th Century Limited at Grand Central Terminal, no doubt treading the red carpet that the line unfurled for travelers, bound for his home in Santa Fe.

Sometime that day, Riggs sent a hastily written note to Barrett Clark, his editor and manager at Samuel French, expressing satisfaction with reviews of *Russet Mantle*



by *New Masses'* Stanley Burnshaw and the *New Yorker's* Robert Benchley (Letter to Clark). Burnshaw had judged the play a "tragicomedy" distinguished by "so subtle an interweaving of tragedy and laughter that it emerges essentially as a work of deep seriousness" (28). Benchley had praised "the superlative quality of [Riggs's] comedy" and declared Riggs "one of the best writers of comedy in the country." *Russet Mantle*, he claimed, was "one of the best-acted plays in town, and [. . .] one of the funniest" (26). Others agreed. In the *New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson applauded the play's "pure comedy" (Review of *Russet Mantle* 15); an unsigned piece in *Time* gushed, "playwright Riggs, hitherto noted for poetic horse operas like *Green Grow the Lilacs*, simply flabbergasted Broadway by revealing an unsuspected talent for Grade A comic characterization" (Review 42). *Russet Mantle* ran for 117 performances, nearly twice as many as *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the "horse opera" that Rodgers and Hammerstein would adapt as *Oklahoma!* in 1943. Riggs was at the apex of his career and had good reason to hope that his star would continue to rise. He promptly settled his debt to Crawford.

Yet *Russet Mantle* does not figure in popular or academic histories of Riggs. Neither does *Knives from Syria* or *Roadside*, both of which were widely performed. The popular narrative instead remembers Riggs for his involvement with the spectacularly successful *Oklahoma!*, a play he did not write. *Green Grow the Lilacs* becomes a failed production with a charmed afterlife. But *Lilacs* was neither Riggs's first Broadway outing nor his introduction to New York audiences—Riggs's Broadway premiere, *Big Lake*, and *Roadside* ran for 11 performances in 1927 and 1930, respectively—and it fared well in its own right. It ran for a respectable 64 performances before the Theatre Guild dispatched it on a well-received two-month, seven-city tour of the Midwest. These productions netted Riggs \$11,222, approximately \$230,000 in 2024 currency (see Samuel French). *Lilacs* would be revived through the late 1960s, coast to coast, by

professionals, amateurs, and students. One looks askance, therefore, at reviewers of the 1951 Broadway revival of *Oklahoma!*, who chose to recall *Green Grow the Lilacs* as a "flop" (Peet) that "caused hardly a ripple" (Monahan 67) and "ran but 64 performances, despite a heavy cast" (Murphy F5). Even today, theatergoers are most likely to encounter Riggs's name on promotional material for *Oklahoma!*: by contract, Riggs receives credit on all posters and playbills for the musical *Lilacs* inspired. If this show of respect testifies to the Guild's, and Rodgers and Hammerstein's, decent treatment of Riggs, it also bolsters the popular perception of him as a catalyst for successful drama, rather than a creator.

The scholarly narrative concentrates on *The Cherokee Night*, but also *Green Grow the Lilacs*, with numerous publications, our own as well as Chadwick Allen's, Brown's, Justice's, Jace Weaver's, and Womack's, for example, dedicated to the former and Jenna Hunnef's to the latter but with a significant historical and political link established between the two.⁶ The presence of *The Cherokee Night* in the conversation has produced important if selective insights into Riggs's place in dramatic history. The two modern editions of Riggs's drama reinforce this circumscription. Weaver's 2003 edition places *Lilacs* alongside *The Cherokee Night* and the previously unpublished but artistically satisfying *Out of Dust*. Of this triad, only *Green Grow the Lilacs* fared well in its own time. *The Cherokee Night*, Riggs's most experimental work, played roughly twenty-seven times in his lifetime, with fourteen of those performances taking place in repertory at Jasper Deeter's avowedly anti-commercial Hedgerow Theatre in rural Pennsylvania. The Federal Theatre Project, freed by liberal government from anxieties about profit, funded another ten or so. Atkinson, the sole New York critic willing to make the trip south to the Hedgerow, denounced "the clutter and torture of [the play's] succession of scenes" and accused Riggs of indulging "presumptuous artistic tenets" (Review of *The Cherokee Night* XI). William F. McDermott, the drama critic for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, stands alone among contemporaries in anticipating the future attention the play has received: he praised *The Cherokee Night* as having "sound, intrinsic value" and "power and a kind of rude beauty that lies in strength of feeling"



(1). The Theatre Guild dropped *Out of Dust* after a one-week tryout. It, too, has not been revived on stage, although a television adaptation aired in May 1959 in season 3 of the CBS series *Playhouse 90*.

The title of our 2024 Broadview edition—*Lynn Riggs: The Indigenous Plays*—captures our interest, shared with Allen, Brown, Hunnef, Justice, and other scholars in Native American and Indigenous studies, in the Indigenous content and contexts of Riggs’s plays. We selected plays that “foreground Indigenous history (*The Cherokee Night*), politics (*The Year of Pilar*), and families (*The Cream in the Well*) in ways that Riggs’s other plays do not” (Cox and Pettit, Introduction 25). In January 1941, well after the final documented performance of *The Cherokee Night* in 1936, *The Cream in the Well* opened at the Booth Theatre. The last of Riggs’s Broadway plays, it closed after three weeks and has never been revived. Consensus found the author of *Russet Mantle* and other comedies wanting as a tragedian; no less an eminence than Eleanor Roosevelt framed the point tactfully in her syndicated column when she admitted to finding *The Cream in the Well* “at moments . . . a little too tragic” and “wish[ing] that there had been a few light touches here and there” (4). Ira Wolfert disparaged the play as “sand in everybody’s coffee,” while acknowledging it as “a step in the direction of the creation of a new literature” (10). Arthur Pollock compared it unfavorably to *Russet Mantle*, calling it an “unfortunate” effort in which Riggs “strums tediously on one string” (E6); and Burns Mantle left the play feeling “depressed” and overwhelmed by the “gloom” (49). In the *Times*, Atkinson complimented Riggs’s writing but, witheringly, judged the play “without a tangible meaning” (Review of *Cream in the Well* 19). *The Year of Pilar* ran once for two weeks in 1952 at a small theatre in Greenwich Village, fourteen years after Riggs completed a satisfactory draft (see Cox and Pettit, Introduction 58–62). The sole reviewer dismissed it as “dreary and inconsequential” (Shanley 14). For all this, *The Cherokee Night*, *The Cream in the Well*, *Green Grow the*

Lilacs, *Out of Dust*, and *The Year of Pilar* constitute the totality of Riggs's drama now in print. We admire Weaver's edition and hope readers will respond well to ours, but we recognize that Riggs's reputation, as it does for many writers, has developed ahistorically.

The five republished plays represent a grimmer and less successful Riggs than the well-received comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, the academic concentration on *The Cherokee Night*—violent and full of desperate and self-loathing Cherokees—has shaped a perception of Riggs as an unhappy, self-loathing gay Cherokee. But Riggs had a lighter touch in his repertoire as well, introduced with his first play to reach the stage, a "farce-comedy" called *Cuckoo* (1922), written while he was a student at the University of Oklahoma. *Cuckoo* demonstrated Riggs's ear for comic voices and his immersion in comic dramatic traditions. As Daniel Littlefield explains, there was an Indian Territory tradition of humorous dialect letters, with Alexander Posey the most widely known practitioner. Indeed, Littlefield notes that "J. Ojjiatekha Brant Sera, a Mohawk, wanted him to take his humor on the stage by joining a program of lectures that Brant-Sera was arranging" (*Alex Posey* 184). Littlefield also identified five authors with Cherokee personas in Indian Territory newspapers between 1878 and 1903.⁷ This primarily satirical dialect humor reached its apotheosis in the newspaper columns, radio broadcasts, and books by Rogers. Much of the humor in Riggs's plays derives from the characters' language, rendered carefully in the vernaculars of the Cherokee Nation in Indian Territory and northeastern Oklahoma.

Riggs joins this regional language and sense of humor with other comic traditions. Comedy, like any viable artistic form, manipulates precedent forms, principles, and tendencies. *Cuckoo*, for example, features an OU fraternity member and a pledge who become embroiled in a rustic love plot in the manner of George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707) and Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773). The more mature Riggs would prefer ancient formulae that mutated felicitously in the Renaissance. Northrop Frye's 1957 observation that Greek and Roman New Comedy is "the basis for most comedy, especially in its highly conventionalized



dramatic form, down to our own day," holds up well enough, but Frye's "basis" is not as broad as his argument requires (163). Frye represents New Comedy as preoccupied with courtship and marriage, which it is, sometimes; but the classicist Robert L. Hunter hits closer to the mark when he identifies "the family" as "the basic unit of solidarity" in New Comedy (12). This larger unit pushes the plot toward "the comforting spectacle of the restoration of the status quo after disturbance caused by folly or ignorance" (12). The young couple need not be charming or companionable. Frye does well to pivot to "Shakespearean and other types of romantic comedy," which owe much to the subset of Classical comedies with the plot-points that Frye ascribes to them (167). Riggs works in the tradition of Menander, Plautus, and Terence, but the non-Indigenous formulae that interested him, and many of his contemporaries, date more accurately to the Renaissance.

Thus qualified, our generalizations about comedy owe much to Frye's. Like the plays that most interest Frye, modern comedies move toward the coalescence of twinned worthies and the sidelining of those who would impede them. The worthies tend to be young, lovely, and wealthy or deserving of wealth. Their adversaries, often parents, are usually old and either vexatious or awful. Sexual desire drives plot. Two factors generate conflict: the real or feigned incompatibility of the central couple, and the obstacles to their union erected by elders or competitors in love. When Frye hears "the happy rustle of bridal gowns and banknotes" at endings in Renaissance comedy and the "domestic comedy of later fiction" (44), he incidentally demonstrates the conservatism of the genre, which historically trades in the merger and generational transfer of family fortunes and values propagation, usually among the blue-bloods and ipso facto among heterosexuals. The courtship is fun, but the ideological business of comedy happens after the final curtain. Comedy in its earlier forms is classist, ableist, and heterocentric; the comedy, therefore, often does not survive from generation to

generation.

Like any genre, comedy operates rheostatically, by illuminating or obscuring its conventional elements. To reframe our point, Shakespearean comedy anticipates later drama in its fondness for tinkering consistent with New Comic marriage-plots but at odds with New Comic attitudes and assumptions about marriage. For example, the New Comic *senex amator* ("old lech") is meddling; but Frederick in *All's Well That Ends Well* and Don Juan in *Much Ado About Nothing* are menacing, as are the best-made villains of nineteenth-century US melodrama. The eighteenth-century English genre of the "marital discord comedy"—the term is Robert D. Hume's—recalls *All's Well* but advances the ages of its participants, thus diminishing the fervid, New Comedy-inspired sexuality of straighter Shakespearean comedies while emphasizing other and subtler forms of companionship. The B-plot of *Russet Mantle*, involving Horace and Susanna Kincaid, exemplifies comic marital discord, as does the relationship of the central couple in Riggs's later *Laughter from a Cloud*. O'Neill's *Welded* took this form in the 1920s. Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) is an extreme modern descendent; Sarah Ruhl's *Stage Kiss* (2011) is a tamer and newer one. Comic couples today need not be monied, straight, or interested in marriage or reproduction; but they still need to stumble their way toward a union.

Comedy leaves us with promise, an inversion of "the impression of waste" that A. C. Bradley long identified as "the central feeling" of tragedy (23)—the populous *Cherokee Night* is the best example in Riggs's oeuvre. Post-Classical comic dramatists often attenuate the "promise" at issue, substituting uncertainty about the future for confidence in it. Shakespeare does this in *Measure for Measure*, as Albee does in *Virginia Woolf*. In *A Period of Adjustment*, Tennessee Williams draws attention to the queerness of the male protagonist, patches up his marriage to a woman, and packs the husband and wife off to Texas to raise longhorns, with the protagonist's "buddy" in tow (Williams 169). These plays recall O'Neill's remark on the "happy ending" of "*Anna Christie*"—in which an abused former prostitute agrees to marry a violent and stupid man—as "merely the comma at the end of a gaudy introductory clause, with the body



of the sentence still unwritten" (44). Closure in these "meta-comedies" brings anxious resignation or fragile accord, not resolution in any but a formal sense (see Pettit). Riggs toys with such "commas" in *Cuckoo*, *Knives from Syria*, *Roadside*, and *Green Grow the Lilacs* by floating the possibility of unsavory afterlives. The juxtaposing of heterosexual relationships and violence that generates tragedy in *Big Lake*, *The Domino Parlor*, *The Cherokee Night*, *The Cream in the Well*, and *The Year of Pilar*, allows Riggs in his comedies to complicate the genre's commitment to gentle futurity.

Cuckoo is again a bellwether. The courtship plot is a sham: Doc Helm requires Jay Mason, a pledge to his fraternity, to fake affection for Josie, a "gawky hill-girl" whose mother wants to pawn her off on any old suitor ([1], [10]). Mason obliges; Josie falls head over heels; Helm extricates himself and Mason by telling preposterous tales about Mason, most disturbingly one recounting his having "slashed off" a former fiancée's ear ([23]). If Riggs trolls for laughs from his collegiate audience for much of the play, he chastises them by ending with the "sob[bing]" Josie on stage, "collapsed" between the mercenary parents who have failed to give her away ([25]). The defeated Josie is "waste," not promise. Unlike the moment in which Mason sits on a hot potato, it is not funny.

Cuckoo extends a minute or so beyond the "comma" and insults its collegiate audience in the process. Riggs's later efforts are more accommodating and stronger for suggesting rather than staging the transience of romantic expectations. The relative familiarity and tighter form of his darkest comedy, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, make it a more accessible touchstone. One of the "and other plays" in Weaver's edition, *Lilacs* has been covered extensively in academic publications, most recently and significantly by Hunnef.⁸ The plot is relatively familiar. Laurey Williams loves Curley McClain, who loves her; the couple squabbles and flirts; and the ghastly villain, Jeeter Fry, threatens and terrifies Laurey. Curley and Laurey's marriage at the entr'acte between scenes 4

and 5 is easy to miss and perhaps obscured to emphasize the panicky state of the frightened couple. During the shivoree in scene 5, a mob drags the couple from their bedroom, still dressed, if barely so in Laurey's case. The villagers hoist the newlyweds onto a haystack, to which the serial arsonist Jeeter sets fire. Laurey and Curley escape the immolation but not the mob. Curley tries to wrestle Jeeter's knife from him. It falls; Jeeter falls on it and dies. Curley is sentenced for murder but released for one night to consummate his marriage. Before his initial imprisonment, Laurey had promised to wait for him whether or not he came back to her. His furloughed return brings a familiar winking jubilation. The play ends with the couple upstairs and Curley singing, a fact to which Aunt Eller calls attention "with delight" (104).

As in the other plays under consideration, Riggs embraces comic form in *Lilacs*. The worthy young couple is sexually motivated and prepared to meet the interruptive challenges of plot. *Lilacs* includes Riggs's most skillful repartee before *Russet Mantle*; and, ultimately, marriage disperses money: Laurey is set to inherit "[a] couple of sections" of "grazin' and timber and plowed land" (78). But Jeeter, the blocking character, is terrifying; and the ambience of rape, murder, arson, smut, and vicious stupidity that he carries with him overwhelms the contextually absurd niceties of closure. He is not just dismissed: he dies violently, with a stake (or knife) in his heart. As in O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, perhaps a source here as it seems to have been in *Out of Dust* (see Cox and Pettit, Introduction 36), a couple's coming-together immediately precedes incarceration. "Happily ever after" means sex, a song, a send-off, and a jail cell. Laurey is free but only to wait among the locals who have participated in her violent humiliation. Riggs directs us to ponder the characters' future, which the heartache and melancholy of the title song—sung softly by Curley as the play closes—suggests will be unpleasant or worse.

Lilacs is Riggs's most extreme modification of comedy. It extends an experimental period that *Cuckoo*, *Knives from Syria* and *Roadside* initiate and *Russet Mantle* continues, albeit more conservatively and, box office data suggest, more palatably. The one-act *Knives from Syria* premiered at Santa Fe's Rialto Theatre in May,



1925, on a three-play bill that featured Witter Bynner's *The Little King* and Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook's *Suppressed Desires* (a marital discord play). Riggs, a last-minute stand-in, played the hired man, Charley. Rauh directed. The inclusion of *Knives* in the bill attests to Rauh's faith in the young playwright: she booked, cast, and began rehearsing the play before Riggs completed it (see "Players" 3). As in many of Riggs's plays, *Roadside* and *Russet Mantle* included, women drive the action. When the curtain rises, the "still definitely young" widow Mrs. Buster and her eighteen-year-old daughter, Rhodie, are discussing two men vying for the younger woman (193): Charley, a laborer much older than Rhodie (and three years younger than Mrs. Buster), and an unnamed Syrian peddler, her strong preference for a suitor despite her mother's objections. Charley enters after surviving an attack by a knife-wielding bandit. After he retreats to the barn, the peddler arrives, his "black mustache" identifying him as a stereotypical melodramatic villain and his red bandanna matching Charley's description of his assailant's garb (201).⁹ His down-market Othello schtick—he has traveled widely and seen much—seduces Rhodie; his comments on the utility of knives in domestic disputes alarms her mother, as, in *Cuckoo*, Helms's canard about Mason's attack on his fiancée alarms Josie's mother. Mrs. Buster, once an obstacle to her daughter's union with the peddler, now practically throws Rhodie at him—again recalling *Cuckoo*. She is motivated by fear and self-interest, not concern for a daughter for whom she demonstrates little fondness.

The peddler exits, and Charley returns with the news that he has found and beaten the bandit, a neighbor playing a practical joke, not the peddler. Mrs. Buster, to whose appearance Riggs devotes considerable attention, is free to indulge her attraction to Charley, who reciprocates. The mother worries that her daughter will "hate" her for authorizing an unsavory marriage, but Rhodie enthuses: "I won't even remember you and Charley a-slavin' here together. I'll be on the hills *he* told me about.

I'll be with *him!* We won't never come back!" (207). The stage directions do not call for a slammed door; no director would stage the scene without one.

The lineaments of comedy are evident throughout this play, down to the sorting of A- and B-couples—a Plautine move replicated by Shakespeare in his derivative *Comedy of Errors* and elsewhere. But the experimentalist Riggs modifies the relative ages of the couples, rethinks youth and propagation, and creates two discrete families rather than one amalgamated one. Most pertinently, the peddler advocates for marital violence; Riggs teased out his depravity when he reprised the character in *Green Grow the Lilacs* as Jeeter's fellow lowlife, name and all. The play's female characters indicate a mild liberalizing tendency. The "lusty widow" character in early modern English comedy is often ridiculed for her status as female, libidinal, and post-reproductive, thus irrelevant to the demands of the genre.¹⁰ Riggs highlights Mrs. Buster's cowardice and underhandedness but does not discredit the attraction she shares with Charley or suggest that she is beyond child-bearing years. Riggs represents Rhodie sympathetically as well: here as elsewhere in his comedies, a sexually enthusiastic young woman merits indulgence, not amendment—no "taming" is in order, again to glance at Shakespeare. There is no reason to believe that the peddler will marry Rhodie, much less love and honor her all the days of his life. *Green Grow the Lilacs* forces us to consider Laurey's future; *Knives from Syria* allows us to imagine Rhodie's.

Knives was far more popular than the scholarly record suggests. In her tabulation of Riggs's staged plays, Phyllis Braunlich, working with limited resources, noticed only the Santa Fe premiere (see 202). We have identified twenty-four productions comprising roughly forty-three performances in twenty-eight venues, two countries, sixteen states, and Washington DC (see Cox and Pettit, Appendix B 319–21). The play was staged on thirteen college campuses and one military base and by community groups, as well as at a high school and a Baptist church. It was included in the American College Players' 1954 English tour, shortly after Riggs's death, and performed the next year by the Au-Ger-Du-Lo Players (Cherokee for masker) at Northeastern State College in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the capital of the Cherokee Nation. In 1930, NBC's Miniature



Theater broadcast a radio production of the play nationwide that was widely noted in the press.

The preponderance of college productions set a precedent that would continue throughout Riggs's career; and the popularity of one-acts in the US since the heyday of the Provincetown Players in the late 1910s and early 1920s must have owed much to the suitability of short plays to amateur productions. In its own right, *Knives* was well suited to these markets, as it evidently was to the high school productions that we have seen referenced but have not tabulated. The melodramatic characters tempt the sort of over-acting that comes easily to apprentice actors; and the mother/daughter sparring would benefit from goofy ad-libbing and exaggerated physicality. From their inclusion of *Knives* in the 1927 volume of the popular series *One-Act Plays for Stage and Study*, we infer that Samuel French recognized the play's potential for amateur production. Rhodie's insouciance and her flight may have raised an eyebrow among those bound by tradition; but plenty of public libraries purchased the collection, and the organizers of a 1927 "rural talent tournament" in Dane County, Wisconsin, included it in its list of approved plays, recommending it as "very dramatic" ("Good Plays" 41). Riggs knew how to bend convention without breaking faith with audiences.

Roadside is a more ambitious play than *Knives from Syria* and was an even more successful one, too. Riggs's "lusty American comedy," as it was billed on a poster for a 1938 Federal Theatre Project revival at the Musart Theatre in Los Angeles, closed after two weeks on Broadway in 1930, notwithstanding its high-profile producer (Arthur Hopkins) and a talented male lead, Ralph Bellamy, who, at age twenty-five, had already played 400 roles on stage and would soon become an in-demand film actor. With the exception of *Russet Mantle*, however, Riggs's comedies are best evaluated as commercial entities by their record of non-Broadway revivals—a yardstick, as it happens, also pertinent to later Indigenous drama, ignored by Broadway in the long

gap between Riggs's *Borned in Texas* (1950), a *Roadside* re-do, and Larissa FastHorse's *The Thanksgiving Play* (2023). *Roadside*'s post-Broadway life was impressive: fifty productions, mostly at small theatres and on college campuses, again omitting high school productions, spanning the years 1931 to 2001 (see Cox and Pettit, Appendix B 323–25).

The play's rowdy rambler protagonist, Texas, was tailor-made for a period in US dramatic history that valued conventionally handsome leading men. His match, Hannie Rader, a "buxom, well-made girl about twenty" (8) offered the scopic appeal familiar in the theatre and film of Riggs's day and beyond. The play's lingering popularity in the 1970s and 1980s suggests that it remained palatable to progressive theatre-audiences during feminism's second wave; its disappearance after 2001 also tracks with the history of our cultural reckonings with gender and race. *Roadside* is Riggs's most physical comedy, long on sight gags and openings for ad hoc stage business. The blocking character—Hannie's "little bluish-dried-up" ex-husband, Buzzey Hale (3)—tries his best to exude a forceful masculinity, but a director would err in taking the bait. Rather, he makes us feel sorry for the young woman who married him and impressed by her good sense and fortitude in divorcing him.

The play is set in 1905, on the eve of Oklahoma statehood, as Hannie travels through Indian Territory in a wagon with her father, Pap Rader. Buzzey has left his farm in pursuit of Hannie. He thinks of himself as a suitor, but Riggs makes him a de facto senex. (The "good-natured" Pap doesn't qualify for the position.) Black Ike and Red Ike, Tweedledums who have quit their job as Buzzey's farmhands because they miss Hannie, join them. News reaches the group that the "wild and reckless" roustabout Texas has been arrested in nearby Verdigris for public drunkenness (23). Responding to this indignity, Red Ike reports that Texas has "kicked the jedge offen the bench and made jist plum hash outa the courtroom first 'fore they could get him in the calaboose" (24). Moments later we hear Texas's voice "off back" (26), from which station he begins his ambling cross into the playing area, after the manner of entrances in Classical drama.¹¹ The Marshal soon follows. The authorities return Texas to jail a few times, but



he keeps finding his way out, all the while consolidating his hold over the Marshal, a decent ex-farmer whom Buzzey has manipulated. Exasperated and impressed by his on-again, off-again prisoner, the Marshal quits. Buzzey is humiliated, vanquished, and abandoned. He remains, however, tending a dwindling fire overnight, the unsubtle stage directions inform us. His effectual ostracization is accented by the play's setting in Indian Territory, home to the "wild ingerns" that Buzzey fears (12), like other white characters that Riggs will mock in *Russet Mantle* and elsewhere. Texas's last words to Buzzey, "I bet you wish you was us" (157), perfectly express comedy's ageism and its yoking of selectivity and comeuppance. Texas takes charge of the wagon that he will drive, thus effecting the comedy's generational transfer of goods; Pap and the Ikes climb in, too. As the Marshal watches them exit, "a slow admiring grin comes over his face" (158). He has seen a good show, too. Buzzey stands there, crushed.

The community has been reconstituted, tilted young, and sent south, "bound fer the [Texas/US] border" (131). Closure's melding of dispersive and coalescent energies amplifies commentary on land-ownership discernible in *Knives from Syria* and most evident in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, notably in Aunt Eller's "dirty ole furriners" speech to locals and the crowd's insistence that "I'm jist plumb full of Indian blood myself" (103). Although Riggs does not identify Mrs. Buster and Rhodie in *Knives* as Cherokee, he likely intended them to be: his Cherokee mother's family name was Buster, and a Roda Buster owned an allotment close to hers outside of Claremore, Indian Territory.¹² The peddler, however, is an interloper, both by trade and by the Syrian origin that becomes epithetic ("Syrian Ped[d]ler"). The relatively young and racially mixed couple leaves Oklahoma without any clear settlement of property, thus, in comic terms, any stable future. The older couple remains, with Mrs. Buster's allotment presumably secure. The dispersal of youth and the legitimation of age is a neat act of inversion. Coalescence remains; but, as in the marital discord plays, it is enacted by grown-ups—and, in this

case, one or maybe two citizens of a tribal nation.

No such ambiguity obtains in *Roadside*. Hannie's family, like Texas and like the peddler in *Knives*, is definitionally itinerant: they all pass through Indian Territory but are not "of" it. As, above all, a Texan, Texas could still be Cherokee. Riggs, however, does not point to that possibility, as he does in *Knives* and would do, more openly, in *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Texas, the place, was a white-governed colonial state that shared a border with Indian Territory. Texas's (the character's) regional pride and stereotypical fondness for tall tales, brawling, and gun-slinging suggest an affiliation with his birthplace. His origin and his transiency remind readers and viewers that Indian Territory is not his home. Tribal national law rewrites comic convention, which makes property-transfer a (literal) vehicle of dispersal for the reconfigured family. Riggs does not portray the Indigenous residents of Indian Territory, but they are essential, to use the word narrowly, an ambience, not a presence.

Riggs conceptualizes Hannie and Texas's exit and pending nuptials as in some general sense positive, but their implied future recalls Rhodie and the peddler's elopement, with allowance for the differences of artistry evident in the two plays. Hannie Rader is a well-drawn, vibrant character, smart, vociferous, and full of bravado. Texas is a hunk with a short fuse, no doubt diverting in the right performance at the right cultural "moment," but most useful as a foil to Hannie. The audience never doubts her suasive superiority. Following a stichomythic exchange of complaints and insults, Hannie "slowly" advances toward Texas and speaks at length. "I'm *th'ough* with you," she perorates, "I thought mebbe yer head wasn't quite as thick's a board. Now I know it's thick's the Rocky Mountains—and then some!" The fusillade leaves Texas "amazed" (106). He cannot compete, as his earlier acknowledgement that she is "too damn smart" assured us would be the case (44).

Their imbalance disrupts comic form and encourages questions about futurity that comic drama usually elides. In the well-stocked tradition of Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick in *All's Well*, William Congreve's Mirabel and Millamant in *The Way of the World* (1700), and, grotesquely, Albee's George and Martha, Hannie and Texas



squabble entertainingly. But comedy's "witty couples" are marked by an equivalence of speech, the harbinger of more intimate forms of intercourse but pathetic in implying a durable equality that marriage seldom affords. Riggs's couple takes the test: Hannie passes, Texas fails. In act 2, with Hannie offstage, Texas lays into Pap and Buzzey for conspiring to return him to the Marshal. "I'm gonna take Hannie away with me," he blusters, "I'll put her under one arm and claw my way to clear down in the Verdigrée bottom some'eres outa sight, whur I c'n have her all by myself—and *I don't know* after that!" Pap doesn't like Texas's odds, but Texas presses his attack: "She'd kick you both in the pants if I told her to, and lay down and let me walk on her. (*Vulgarly.*) Well, mebbe I don't mean *walk* on her" (66). *Roadside* cannot accommodate Texas's attempt to serve both as the melodramatic villain and savior.

Hannie hears Texas's fusillade from the wagon and reenters in high dudgeon. The women who played her and the audiences that heard them must have relished her bravura assault, which culminates: "Whyn't you beat it up the road, and find a place that ud suit you better? They ain't nuthin' here that's in yore style. And they ain't a soul here that wouldn't like to cut you up and feed you to the coyotes—if the coyotes could stand it. Personally I'd ruther have a nice big piece of a striped skunk! Beat it, I said!" (69–70). Texas hushes up and will soon "beat it" with the Marshal, pliantly. "This is the first time I been knocked holler by a female," he complains; "Kinda gits a feller down in the mouth" (80). All the while, however, readers and viewers know that the two will end up together. Texas will be justified in regarding himself and Hannie as "sump'n alike" (120), even if he cannot quite put his finger on the "sump'n."

A common attitude toward life, rather than verbal parity, binds the two: they both disdain laws, rules, and norms. Texas's admission that he "hates rules" well suits a strong-minded woman who has slipped her matrimonial bonds cavalierly as well as sympathetically. We have already heard that Texas had "kicked the jedge offen the

bench." A rustic Hercules or Old West folk hero, he has "[torn] the roof offen [the] jail" (93) in which he cannot therefore be incarcerated. Texas is sheepish after admitting to this impressive act of destruction. Hannie, present at his hearing, is inspired by it. In a farcical scene rich in opportunities for comic acting but sobering in its implications, outbursts by Hannie and other spectators render the judge apoplectic. "Pounding" his gavel on his desk, he "wildly" addresses the room, hollering "shet up . . . quit it!" then, "fiercely," "Shet up!" (99). With "icy rage," he descends to the floor; passes the gavel to Hannie ("You run this court, you're so *smart!*"); and "hobbles out angrily" (100). Hannie asks, rhetorically, "What's the matter with *that* ole mustard plaster?," then continues in "high humor":

Well, you heared whut he said! "Run this court yerself," didn't he? That ud be a good un! I'd do it right! I'd tear up the courtrooms and burn down the jails. I'd turn all the prisoners loose, let 'em run hog-wild. I'd give 'em money, I'd show 'em the road! That's the kinda jedgin' I'd do! . . . I'd scalp all the guards, th'ow the marshals in the crick... I'd burn all the law books and start over.
(100)

Hannie ideologizes the anarchy endemic to farce. Her histrionic fervidity recalls the anarchist manifestos of the 1910s and the rantings of Alfred Jarry's King Ubu, while anticipating the anarchism of Azdak, the judge in Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. But, as Riggs's legitimization of a Communist vagabond in *Russet Mantle* will suggest, Riggs could tack left politically without commercial risk. The inclusion of the scene in French's series *Scenes for Student Actors* (1937) suggests the marketability of verbal mayhem, not the frisson of sexed-up anarchy.

The scene initiates the coalescence of the play's central couple. Texas, chastised by Hannie's tongue-lashing, rallies. While Hannie continues her tirade, he grabs the Marshal's pistol, threatens to shoot him, then heads for the exit, determined to put Hannie and Indian Territory behind him. He has not realized that Hannie has acted out of desire or love for him. She tells him. Slowly he gets it. More squabbling looms, but lust and a spirit of adventure bind them. Like O'Neill's *Anna Christie*, and like Rhodie



Buster, Hannie has partnered with a lout, which despite the laughter risks leaving the audience with Bradley's "impression of waste."

When a play ends without closure, it tempts the audience to imagine afterlives for the characters. In *The Way of the World*, William Congreve gestured at the disconnect between comic closure's fantasy of companionate marriage and the reality of women's status in an androcentric culture. The lead woman, Millamant, knows that a smitten and capable woman can "dwindle into a wife," that is, that wives, "dwindled" once by marrying, can be "dwindled" repeatedly by marriage (380). Riggs knows that, too, and the prevalent violence in his heterosexual pairings does not let us forget it. The difference between *Roadside* and *Knives from Syria* concerns craft, not attitude, and the relative expansiveness of shorter and longer plays. *Roadside*, a radical play in its apparent espousal of anarchy, is more durably so in its implicit questioning of comedy's central tenet: the myth of "happily ever after" among couples unblessed by good luck or by the time, money, capability, or courage to work through the complexities of marriage, undramatically.

Russet Mantle represents the high point of the main and most successful trajectory of Riggs's career. Riggs connected the play to *Knives* by dedicating it to Rauh, who was then living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where Riggs set his play. The transplants Horace and Susanna Kincaid had retired to a ranch "a few years" before the action starts (78). There, Horace worries about the stock market that once served him well. Susanna, a self-described "dreamer" (75), wonders if she should have married Larry, the idealist romantic partner of her youth. The Kincaids do not have children, but their marriage is melancholic, not tumultuous like the marriage of the childless George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The arrivals of and the prompt hints of intimacy between Kay Rowley, their niece, and John Galt, a Communist poet, remind Susanna and Horace of their own discontent while also distracting them from it. They negotiate

the emotional landmines around them with greater dexterity than Albee's George and Martha, themselves already weighted with trauma. The pregnancies (Kay's and probably Manuelita's) in *Russet Mantle*, however, are not imaginary, as Martha's was. The generation gap yawns in both plays, but Riggs draws humor from the responses by the older Anglo characters to the younger generation's and the servant class's casual licentiousness. Kay and John's mutual affection and their intermittent displays of significant incompatibility drive the play towards both promise and waste. Riggs keeps the audience in suspense until the final moments, when comedy (promise) triumphs over tragedy (waste).

Three invocations of Shakespeare encourage a skeptical reading of *Russet Mantle's* ending. The play's title derives from *Hamlet*, in act 1, scene 1 of which "the morn in russet mantle clad" (181) both vanquishes the ghost of a controlling patriarch and introduces a course of action that is anything but rosy. An exchange of lines from the tragicomedy *Romeo and Juliet* begins when Kay "mockingly" answers John's "impatient and loud" response to her unannounced entry with "O, speak again, bright angel!" (*Russet Mantle* 66; see *Romeo and Juliet* 2.2.29). When John realizes that the intruder is Kay, he first plays along, then aborts the game by saying, "I see you read ... How are you in 'Much Ado About Nothing?'" (66). This may or may not be John's attempt at a teasing deflation, but Riggs's nod to a play with a disturbing preamble to a putatively satisfactory B-marriage is noteworthy in either case. The couple survives the entanglements of allusion, which nonetheless have made it difficult to ignore John's condescension, his occasional bursts of anger, and his shocked reaction to hints about Kay's sexual portfolio. Insofar as one can split a hair with punctuation, the ending seems a semicolon that a director might press into service as a full stop or an O'Neillian comma—or, better, might hear and honor.

Susanna voices the play's affecting ambivalence and so claims a greater dramatic prominence than comedy usually allows its elders, although Mrs. Buster provides an analogue in Riggs's canon. Susanna facilitates and regrets Kay's pairing with John. Her and Horace's long-ago decision not to have children still provokes



arguments and, imaginatively, it suggests their indifference to the dictates of comedy. Their entrepreneurial failures mark their inadequacies as comic elders and as settler-colonialists. Susanna raises chickens; Horace grows apples; neither does so well or profitably. They do not belong in what Susanna thinks of as the “wild country” (21) that she inhabits reluctantly, as an adjunct to a man with whom she has never been in love. We empathize with her in scene 2, when she mixes an uncertain flirtation into the pathetic personal history she shares with John, whose (theoretical) ability to respond feelingly is lessened by his knowing that Kay is overhearing their exchange.¹³ Like her niece, Susanna is drawn to “wild.” Unlike Kay, she cannot experience it.

Susanna’s claim to have “many Indian friends in the nearby pueblos” (80) is patronizing, and her sequestering of Native people offstage and their shortage onstage suggest that she comes by her largesse easily. An episode from Riggs’s earlier life offers context. In January 1924, the young playwright had witnessed an agitprop Indigenous response to early twentieth-century white tourism in Puebloan New Mexico. Riggs’s letter to author and University of Oklahoma English instructor Walter Stanley Campbell and his wife, Isabel Jones Campbell, relates a tale of an excursion to San Felipe Pueblo. After getting stuck in the mud and missing the dance, Riggs and his party arrive and immediately mistake two children playing with drums for a ceremony in a kiva. They depart for Santo Domingo but miss the dance there, too, while witnessing a memorable street-scene: “A tall Indian with a suitcase and a linen duster and an umbrella supplied the fun. He scattered candy to the children and young ones, and cried in Spanish: ‘How do you do? You nice Indians. I’m from New York and I think you’re so interesting!’ And people are fond of believing they have no sense of humor” (Riggs to Campbell). The performer has observed non-Native interlopers and found them ridiculous. The performer of this satire, this one-act street play, has observed non-Native visitors to his home and found their views of Indigenous people worthy of

mockery.¹⁴ The writers of *Reservation Dogs* (2021-2023) find humor in the same place, as in any scene with Kenny Boy (Kirk Fox) or in season 1, episode 3, which opens with a white couple driving in a car and musing on the phrase "Land Back" spraypainted on a road sign.¹⁵ Though Riggs might have already reached the same conclusion, this episode at Santo Domingo gave him insight into how the residents of the pueblos experienced the significant rise of tourism to their homes in the early twentieth century and the often strange, unpleasant, and demeaning assumptions about Indigenous people that those visitors brought with them.

Perhaps drawing inspiration from the Santo Domingan street actor, Riggs also mocks non-Natives for romanticizing the Puebloan people as "nice Indians." After inviting John to stay and help care for the chickens, Susanna tells him that he does not need to lock his door. "Nobody'll come in," she says, "Except maybe an Indian. We have many Indian friends in the nearby pueblos. Sometimes, if we're out, they just come in and sit for hours—till we come back. It's all very friendly" (80). But Riggs also ridicules Effie, Susanna's sister and Kay's mother, for her outrageously reductive and ill-informed views of Indigenous people as bloodthirsty primitives. Effie, a wealthy, vacationing Kentuckian, enters in act 1, affecting a Southern accent that "almost satiri[z]es herself and her Southernness" and sporting an "organdie dress [and] a picture hat" that would have suited Williams's Blanche Dubois in the next decade (12). She promptly asks Kay if she will see "real live redskins" on day one of her visit. Susanna tells her that Indigenous people in New Mexico live in towns, a fact to which Effie objects: "In towns! I thought they lived on the plains. History says that the Indians are inhabitants of the Great Plains region west of the —" (13). To Effie, Indians are "red and bloodthirsty" and "savages" (13). Her "historical" perspective informs her response to the news of Kay's pregnancy: "Someone came in the night. Someone overpowered her! [. . .] Horace, lynchin' is too good for whoever's responsible. You got to organize a lynchin' party at once!" (109). When Horace expresses doubt about where to direct the proposed cohort, Effie suggests targeting an Indigenous man: "What if it was one of those savage Indians—maybe one from Ildefonso?" (109). Conveniently for Effie, a candidate,



Salvador, has been sitting quietly nearby. He flees in response to her outburst.

Effie's racism indicates a pervasive intolerance to everything "undreamed of in the philosophy" of white upper-crust Louisville society. Her unhinged reaction upon learning that she will soon become a grandmother teases toward excess an older generation's dismay at a younger one's sexual liberation. As obstacles to the young lovers, however, all three mature characters are hapless. Kay and John consummated their relationship immediately upon John's arrival; they have been lovers, as John puts it, "ever since I first came" (113). When Effie awkwardly conflates their sexual relationship with marriage, John responds that it is "much more than that, I imagine" (113). Riggs uses punctuation to highlight the generation gap: John's statement ends in a period; Horace, Susanna, and Effie respond with eleven exclamations interrupted only by two questions from Horace: "Who the hell are you, anyway?" and "Don't you know your place—?" (114). John might ask Horace the same questions: he is neither a believable nor a likable character, nor is he a compelling representative of a revolutionary working-class ideology; but he does, confidently, know who he is and he does realize that his place is not in Horace's world. Effie, Susanna, and Horace conspire to keep the lovers apart; but after some wavering, Kay decides to join John.

Kay's explanation for her decision—"This isn't our world—we didn't make it. We must live in a world that's *our time*" (120)—is the essence of comedy: the effort by a younger generation to find a new, less oppressive world with fewer absurd adults imposing their inflexible morality. Rhodie Buster departs for a new world with the peddler; Hannie Rader leaves her husband to travel through and beyond Indian Territory; Kay and John are already far from their homes and, as the play ends, they will also leave Kay's family. *Cuckoo's* Josie wants to leave but cannot. The dispersive pattern holds in *Laughter from a Cloud*, a late effort by Riggs to recapture the glorious moment when *Russet Mantle* succeeded on Broadway. Riggs wrote *Laughter* in the late

1940s, following a stint in the Army. He set the play in the Nambe Valley near Santa Fe at the home shared by Lisa Walker and Ann Ellison, her eighteen-year-old daughter. Lisa has left her husband, Cleve; Ann is engaged to a rancher, Mason. Dr. Hank Burbage and his son, Dick, appear; and, in line with *Russet Mantle*, Dick and Ann immediately fall in love and shock the older generation with their physical effusions. Lisa and Cleve reconcile, and Ann breaks her engagement with Mason and leaves with the Burbages to join Dick on an expedition to the Pacific. An effort to launch *Laughter* on Broadway in the summer of 1947 failed after multiple tryouts in the Northeast. *Russet Mantle*'s long period of popularity had ended seven years earlier.

In contrast to the flight from home in these plays, *Lilacs'* Curley and Laurey prepare for the new world of Oklahoma statehood—figuratively, the “beautiful morning” of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*—by marrying and, apparently, deciding to stay in their homeland. It is a more conventional decision that helps explain the play’s commercial success. Rodgers and Hammerstein put a happier face—more comedy, less real or latent violence—on heterosexual romance than audiences get from Riggs. Riggs’s comedies always have menace, especially the threat of sexual violence against women, bubbling to their surfaces. Many of the laughs he elicits are uncomfortable ones. While Indigenous people of Indian Territory found humor in their lives, as Will Rogers demonstrated throughout his career, the laughter only temporarily distracts from the weight of a traumatic history and its legacy as dramatized by Riggs. Riggs might have muted the menace, but it remained as a damper on comedy’s conventional promise.

By emphasizing this comic trajectory, the defining trajectory of Riggs’s professional life, we lose the salubrious focus on Indigeneity but expand our understanding of the man and his career. But we cannot separate Indigeneity from Riggs and his career, from the funny Riggs or the Riggs who wrote successful comedies and continued to write them because audiences and reviewers liked them. As Drew Hayden Taylor observes,

Native humour comes from five hundred years of colonization, of oppression, of



being kept prisoners in our own country. With legalized attacks on our culture, our language, our identities and even our religion, often the only way left for Native people to respond to the cruel realities of Fourth World existence was in humour. Humour kept us sane. It gave us power. It gave us privacy. (69)

Riggs would have endorsed Taylor's observation, we suspect. He might have wanted to write more plays like *The Cherokee Night*, *The Cream in the Well*, and *The Year of Pilar*, and it must have been discouraging to see those plays rejected by producers and in some cases audiences. But he also enjoyed writing comedies. Larissa FastHorse faced a similar dramatic landscape almost one-hundred years after Riggs's own debut on Broadway: *The Thanksgiving Play*, which reached Broadway in 2023, was a comic outing with no Indigenous characters. It ran for fifty-three performances and garnered much praise.

The arrival of *The Thanksgiving Play* on Broadway suggests that US theater may have begun to acknowledge the merit of Indigenous humor, specifically the brand that thrives on mocking non-Native views of Indigenous people and that we see in both Riggs's letter to Campbell and *Russet Mantle*. Riggs opened this door, unmistakably for FastHorse and perhaps for the less commercially successful Taylor and non-dramatic Indigenous comedians like Charlie Hill—see, for example, Hill's response to the question "Can you speak Indian?" ("Can you speak Caucasian?") and the 1491s's skit "I'm an Indian Too," made on the plaza in Santa Fe, or "The Indian Store," which gleefully ridicule non-Native's appropriation of Indigenous identities and lack of knowledge about Indigenous people, respectively.¹⁶ Deloria Jr.'s lament, repeated by Hill at the beginning of his first television appearance on *The Richard Pryor Show*, that white people thought "Indians never had a sense of humor," still resonates.¹⁷ Riggs could create a sense of gloom and desperation on the stage, but he could also make an audience laugh. Indeed, he found more success doing the latter. The Indigenous

and the humorous only briefly cross paths in his plays, but even Hill, after finding his way to Hanay Geiogamah's (Kiowa Nation) Native American Theatre Company at La MaMa Theater in New York and making his "first professional performance" there (Nesteroff, 121), only gained a substantial audience more than twenty years after Riggs's death.¹⁸ *FastHorse's* comedy premiered on Broadway almost another fifty years later. In this light, the Depression-era *Russet Mantle*—a successful Broadway comedy by an Indian Territory-born Cherokee playwright, a play that satirizes reductive, stereotypical views of Indigenous people—appears even more extraordinary.

Notes

¹ We identify Riggs by his citizenship status and other Indigenous writers with tribal nation citizenship in the same way, except when they prefer a different public self-identification.

² The Little Theatre movement of the 1910s and beyond championed lesser-known playwrights and local theatres and actors, specifically in opposition to glitzy touring productions. The Hedgerow Theatre, noted below, exemplified the movement and regularly staged Riggs's work.

³ Riggs praises O'Neill on several occasions in his unpublished correspondence; for a sample, see Cox 3.

⁴ See Womack, *Red on Red; Justice, Our Fire Survives the Storm; Brown, Stoking the Fire*. Womack identifies as Muscogee Creek and Cherokee, but he is not enrolled in either tribal nation.

⁵ Here and throughout the article, all currency is in US dollars.

⁶ See Hunnef, "Old Song, Rough Music: The Shivoree Politics of Lynn Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs*"; Allen, "When a Mound Isn't a Mound, But Is: Figuring (and Fissuring) Earthworks in Lynn Riggs's *The Cherokee Night*"; and Weaver, *That the People Might Live*, which includes a discussion of *Green Grow the Lilacs*.

⁷ See Littlefield and the edited collection by Littlefield and Hunter.

⁸ For recent scholarship on the play, see Joseph Roach, "World Bank Drama" (2007); W. Douglas Powers, "A Cosmogony for the Marginalized: Lynn Riggs, Mythmaking, and Multiracial-Homosexual Apologetics" (2016); Charlotte Canning's *Theatre and the USA* (2023); and "*Green Grow the Lilacs and Oklahoma!*" by Carolyn Gage.

⁹ For the centrality of "stock characters"—and "stereotyped plots"—to New Comedy, see Hunter 59–82.

¹⁰ See, for example, the Widow Blackacre in William Wycherley's *The Plain-Dealer* (1676); Lady Wishfort in *The Way of the World*; and, later, Mrs. Malaprop in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775). Aphra Behn regards the tradition skeptically in



The City-Heiress (1682). For antecedents in Chapman, Middleton, and other Renaissance dramatists, see Panek, especially 77–123, 157–201.

¹¹ Characters in 5th- and 4th-century BC Greek drama entered the *orchēstra*, or playing area, through *eisodoi* located at what we would now call upstage left and upstage right. See Storey and Allen: “characters [would] take a while to make their entrance, and would have been visible for some time before they actually set foot in the *orchēstra*. These arrivals are generally announced by the chorus or another character on stage” (28). One imagines the actor Texas making the most of his entry and of the awe of *Roadside*’s dimwitted “chorus” of Ikes.

¹² We thank Jenna Hunnef for this observation.

¹³ Compare to the denigration of desiring women in early comedy (see note 4, above). Atkinson’s description of Susanna as “a silly chatterbox with an empty head” (Review of *Russet Mantle* 15) may have captured Varden’s performance of earlier scenes but could have applied to her intimate scene with John only at cost to what Burnshaw plausibly found the production’s “tragicom[ic]” status (28). See also Mantle: “Varden is nicely cast as a disillusioned lady with a lost romance that troubles her dreams” (23).

¹⁴ When an Indigenous person, “an old chief,” visits New York and receives a dinner invitation from a white man, Deloria, Jr. suggests, the circumstances retain the same comic potential (*Custer* 161).

¹⁵ *Reservation Dogs* was created by filmmaker and founding member of the 1491s (see below) Sterlin Harjo (Seminole Nation of Oklahoma) and Māori filmmaker Taika Waititi.

¹⁶ “I’m an Indian, Too” is a song written by Irving Berlin for the 1946 musical *Annie Get Your Gun*.

¹⁷ Hill saw Deloria, Jr., promoting *Custer Died for Your Sins* on *The Dick Cavett Show*. See Nesteroff, 86, 106. For Hill’s joke about “speaking Indian,” see his performance on *The Richard Pryor Show*.

¹⁸ For Hill’s relationship with La MaMa, see Nesteroff, 106-8 and 121-3.

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ARTICLE

“What Does it Mean to Do Indigenous Studies in Europe in the 2020s? Different Perspectives, Conversations and Reflections”

RENE DIETRICH

Introduction

Native Studies in Europe has a tradition that dates back at least to the 1980s—marked for instance by the founding of the American Indian Workshop in 1980 (www.american-indian-workshop.org/), which continues to serve as a vital network for scholars of Native American literatures and cultures across the continent. That the 2024 Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA, <https://naisa.org>) conference was held in Bødo, Norway, can be seen as marking a significant milestone for Native and Indigenous studies in Europe, as it was the first time that the meeting was held in a European country, specifically on Sámi territory. With it being the third time— after

Hawai'i in 2016 and Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2019— that the NAISA meeting took place outside of the North American Mainland, we can also view this as an indicator of the field's increasing transnationalization. From this perspective, it is more suggestive of the field's widening scope than the growth of the field in Europe particularly.

Regardless of how we choose to read it, though, having the largest association for Native and Indigenous Studies meet in Europe highlights the continent's coloniality as well as pointing to Europe as home to Indigenous peoples. Doing so makes it clear that Europe, with regard to the issues raised by Native Studies, does not have the status of an outside observer. The particular fascination that a number of European countries have toward an imagined North American “Indianness” is only the most visible and best-known sign of a deeper and largely displaced European entanglement with Indigenous dispossession and colonization in that regard— an entanglement that concerns the inquires and practices of Native Studies in Europe as well (see among others Mackay and Stirrup; Usbeck; Lutz, Strzelcyk and Watchman; Kolinska, Runtić and Marešová). The moment of NAISA 2024 in Europe can then be an occasion to consider how Europe has developed as a site for Indigenous Studies until today. That Europe hosts research institutions of Native Studies such as the Centre for Indigenous and Settler Colonial Studies at York (<https://www.york.ac.uk/english/research/centre-for-indigenous-and-settler-colonial-studies/>), and that it is the editorial home of this journal, *Transmotion*, as well as more recently of *Settler Colonial Studies* (<https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rset20>) speak to the degree of its development. Beyond that, one can witness an increasing reflection of European scholars on what it means to do Native and Indigenous Studies in Europe—a conversation to which my essay seeks to contribute.

In 2011, Deborah Madsen argued that Native American literary studies as practiced in Europe was not in sync with Native American literary studies in the U.S. She took particular issue with the fact that Native literature tended to be read and especially taught as contributing to a U.S. national canon, or as one ethnic literature



among others, or as an American version of postcolonial writing. Madsen attributed this partly to the fact how Native American Studies in Europe was not independent but institutionally integrated within American and British literary studies departments.– In contrast to this earlier assessment, I want to posit that today Native Studies (still mostly housed within the disciplinary frameworks of literary and cultural studies, but also extending beyond that), as practiced and taught in Europe, has progressed to a large extent from those varying Americanist and Eurocentric readings. Even with an ongoing lack of institutionalization on the university and departmental level, the general burgeoning of the field and its transnationalization have put European scholars of Indigenous Studies in much closer dialogue with Indigenous scholars in the Americas, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand so that the paradigms of Indigenous Studies in Europe are more closely aligned with the larger international field. Today, European Indigenous Studies scholars operate with the same key terms, such as sovereignty and self-determination, settler colonialism and decolonization, agency and presence, that have shaped the field of Indigenous Studies on a larger scale.

That the field is growing more transnational, however, also raises questions for the practice of Native Studies within Europe: What distinct European perspectives on Indigeneity are emerging, and how do they intersect with the field's increasing transnationalization? How does a European positionality shape scholarly approaches that extend beyond mere acknowledgment of distance from the lands of Indigenous communities? And how does understanding Indigenous experiences within Europe, such as those of the Sámi in the Nordic context or the Irish experience of colonization, adds complexity to these inquiries? These questions point to the issues of Native agency and presence within Europe; a settler colonial paradigm that includes Europe's entanglements and the ongoing histories of settler colonization within Europe; and an investigation of European representations of "Indianness" that addresses Europe's own

colonial culpabilities— rather than serving to continue an objectification of Native people. All of these approaches and directions come with new challenges, while at the same time some of the old challenges such as the lack of institutionalization remain. With this in mind, and through conversations with three scholars of Native literary, visual and media studies as well as of Nordic and global colonialism, this essay seeks to explore how these changes and challenges influence research, teaching, networking, and diverse methodologies within Native Studies today.

For the conversations I chose as partners Chiara Minestrelli, Janne Lahti, and Jana Maresova. With this selection, I wanted to pay attention to geographical and national diversity, taking into account perspectives from Western Europe (UK), Northern Europe (Finland), and Central/Eastern Europe (Czech Republic), as well as to showcase disciplines across the spectrum of literary and cultural studies as well as history. In addition, each scholar was engaged in their work with Europe and the meaning of Europe for Indigenous Studies: Minestrelli is concerned with the significance and the ethics of practicing Indigenous Studies in the heart of Empire, Lahti interrogates the largely unacknowledged and ongoing history of Finnish and more generally Nordic (settler) colonialism, and Maresova (together with her co-editors) investigates the ongoing stereotyping of Indigenous people in Europe and which ends this continues to serve in Central and Eastern Europe. Beyond their scholarship, I was interested in the position Minestrelli and Lahti held within institutions of Native and settler colonial studies, namely with Minestrelli as a co-director of the Centre for Indigenous and Settler Colonial Studies, and with Lahti having recently taken on the position as the editor of the journal *Settler Colonial Studies*. With Minestrelli and Maresova, I was also intrigued in the perspectives of scholars who worked within different national contexts in Native Studies, both within and beyond Europe. Finally, I was interested to hear the perspectives of scholars who are part of a more recent generation of academics whose work— as well as my own— developed in the past fifteen



years and thus in the wake of Madsen's assessment of Native (literary) Studies in Europe at the beginning of the 2010s.

The following conversations thus attempt to reflect—even if necessarily only to a limited degree—the evolving landscape of the field and to serve as a lens through which we can critically assess its development since Madsen's observations in 2011. Minestrelli emphasizes the importance of integrating Indigenous perspectives across multiple disciplines, advocating for a collaborative, decolonial approach that prioritizes Indigenous agency. Lahti engages with the complexities of Nordic colonialism and critiques the politicization of the field, leading to the question to which degree scholarship can (or should) maintain a critical distance from the politics of colonization and Native sovereignty. Maresova highlights the need for self-reflection among non-Indigenous scholars and advocates for genuine engagement with Indigenous voices to combat lingering colonial attitudes.

The conversations show that the challenges outlined by Madsen, such as the institutional marginality of Native studies in Europe, remain pertinent today. At the same time, the growth and progress of the field in Europe is apparent due to the fact that these conversations would have sounded quite different fifteen or even ten years ago. Around 2010 settler colonial studies was just emerging as an important—and contested—paradigm for interrogating the situation of Native peoples, and decolonization was not yet widely articulated as a horizon for the field of Indigenous peoples—let alone thinking about Europe as a space to decolonize. In this way, the following conversations outline challenges but also present the current moment as one of opportunity for growth with recent global movements for racial justice and decolonization—and their backlash—continuing to reshape the academic and cultural landscape.

Ultimately, I see this essay serving as a platform for exploring diverse methodologies and approaches employed in Native Studies today and assessing how these can, in different ways, foster collaboration, amplify Indigenous voices, and critically engage with the legacies of colonialism. When reflecting on these conversations, it becomes evident that the future of Native Studies in Europe hinges on a commitment to ethical and responsible scholarship. In honoring both past moments of departure and future opportunities of moving further, such a scholarship can be, in the spirit of this tenth-year anniversary issue, a version of European Indigenous studies for the seventh generation. By embracing this multifaceted perspective and making sure that we keep up conversations such as the following ones, scholars can work to ensure that Indigenous literary and visual studies within Europe remain dynamic, relevant, and responsive to the needs of Indigenous peoples and nations. As becomes clear in the conversations with Chiara Minestrelli, Janne Lahti, and Jana Maresova (and as I will reflect in this essay following them), analyzing Europe's imperial legacies and their connections to broader narratives of Indigenous dispossession while engaging meaningfully with Indigenous communities worldwide is integral to a field thus envisioned.

Conversation with Chiara Minestrelli: Doing Research With Not On Indigenous People at the Heart of Empire

René Dietrich: Please talk a bit about your own work and background and how you see this as connected to the question of doing Indigenous Studies in Europe or coming from Europe.

Chiara Minestrelli: A bit about my background, I did a PhD in Indigenous Studies at Monash University in Australia, which I often mention because when I completed it in 2010, it was an interesting time. By the time I finished my doctorate, a new generation of Indigenous activists and leaders had emerged, and a new form of cultural awareness was reshaping public discourse within Australia. At that time, I wasn't fully aware of the



complexity of embarking on such a project as a non-Indigenous person, but I had a passion for justice and Indigenous rights, as well as relationships with Indigenous communities in Australia.

Before that, I had started another PhD in Italy on Indigenous literature in Australia, but I realized it wasn't ethical to do that from a European institution without active collaborations with Indigenous peoples. I decided to quit and move to Australia, where I had previously worked as a secondary school teacher. I made connections, and through conversations, I noticed the rise of Indigenous hip-hop in Australia, which led me to pursue a PhD in that area. Eventually, after consulting with some Indigenous Elders and friends, I felt I had the support to work on my project in an ethical way.

Of course, there were challenges with my positionality as a white European woman working in Indigenous spaces. I questioned my right to be doing this research. However, after discussions with my supervisors and local Indigenous communities, I decided to continue, ensuring my work aligned with decolonizing methodologies and gave back to the communities I was working with. It was important that the research was collaborative and not just about me imposing my voice. It was mainly about finding a way to 'give back' to the people I worked with.

Eventually, I left Australia and went to the United States, where I became involved in Native American issues, especially during the Trump election and the Standing Rock protests. I organized events with Native American artists, poets, and musicians, focusing on creating transnational connections, as I did in Australia. After almost three semesters at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, I moved to the UK, where it was harder to continue this work since few people were doing Indigenous Studies.

After reaching out to the Menzies Australian Institute, I got a permanent position at the London College of Communication, part of the University of the Arts, London. My background in cultural studies, communication, and linguistics helped me develop

my research into Indigenous media and communication. My first book focused on Australian Indigenous hip-hop, and I've since expanded into Indigenous media, immersive technologies and digital heritage.

Currently, I'm working on a project involving VR to tell stories from the perspective of cultural objects, particularly a turtle shell mask from the Torres Strait Islands. We want to raise questions around objects being animate with human-like characteristics and curatorial practices within Western museums. One of the aims is to engage the younger generations, foster a sense of belonging in them, and address a series of other issues as identified by the Elders. The second phase will involve bringing the VR artifact to the UK and engaging with British institutions on questions of repatriation, or 'rematriation'. As one of the directors of the Centre for Indigenous and Settler Colonial Studies, I am also committed to supporting any form of intervention to help Indigenous artists/leaders/activists engage with British institutions, if asked to do so.

René Dietrich: Coming from such an international background, how do you think your experiences in Italy, Australia, and the US have shaped your approach to Native Studies? What are the main differences and challenges you see for Native Studies in Europe?

Chiara Minestrelli: In terms of my positionality in Australia, there were both pros and cons, but mostly pros. Being Italian, I wasn't perceived as part of the colonial history, which helped me build warm relationships and foster collaboration. Many Indigenous people appreciated that I came with a different perspective on their issues, and my status as an outsider made it easier for them to trust me, compared to some of my Australian colleagues, particularly those of Anglo background. However, I still had to reflect on how my subjectivity—my gender, sexuality, and age—affected my research and interactions, especially in a predominantly male environment. Overall, though, I was seen not as a settler but as someone willing to engage and learn.



My travels to places like Finland, where I liaised with Sámi communities at the University of Helsinki, gave me further insights into Indigenous issues. Being someone who travels frequently has been advantageous in building relationships and networks.

As for Indigenous Studies in the UK, much has changed over the past five years. When I first joined my institution, there was little interest in questions around Indigeneity, and my research was initially dismissed. However, the events of 2020, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, sparked a renewed focus on human and minority rights, leading to a surge of interest in Indigenous and Black studies. This shift allowed me to continue my work with more institutional support.

Looking ahead, I think the role of Indigenous Studies in the UK and Europe is shifting away from merely researching Indigenous peoples. It's more about engaging in conversations around repatriation, decolonization, and allyship. Our responsibility as scholars in Europe is to create networks and infrastructures that amplify Indigenous voices, allowing them to shape the agenda rather than having white scholars speak on their behalf. It's about facilitating and supporting Indigenous leadership in navigating and challenging the structures of Empire.

René Dietrich: I'm curious about your thoughts on doing Indigenous Studies from Europe, especially as a non-settler space but one deeply tied to empire and colonial legacies. Has the renewed focus on decolonization in Europe since 2020 changed perspectives on Indigenous Studies, and how does this tie into the edited volume you're working on?

Chiara Minestrelli: Yes, Europe is a not traditionally conceived as a settler space but still steeped in colonial legacies, making it a complex site for Indigenous Studies. There's a long-standing tension—many Indigenous scholars and artists are drawn to Europe, particularly the UK, because of its imperial past and the presence of colonial

institutions holding Indigenous objects. These institutions are seen with both rejection and reverence, as they house objects that are viewed as relatives, not just artifacts.

Recently, there have been significant events, like the Tent Embassy installation at Tate Modern, which brought Indigenous scholars from around the world to London. This highlights how the UK, as the "heart of Empire," continues to hold symbolic power, even as conversations around decolonization progress.

In terms of Indigenous Studies in Europe, there are growing discussions, especially with delegations from places like Australia and Canada. A key takeaway from these discussions is the need to address reparations and meaningful decolonization, not just in theory but in practice. This involves rethinking how we do research and teach, especially when non-Indigenous scholars are engaging with Indigenous issues. It's about 'Indigenizing' not just institutions but also our methodologies and approaches.

The edited volume I'm working on with David Stirrup and Chris Andersen aims to address these questions: what does it mean to do Indigenous Studies from Europe? But instead of European scholars dictating the agenda, we're focusing on listening to Indigenous scholars and communities to understand their priorities. The book will include both Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices, fostering a space for debate and reflection on what it means to engage in Indigenous Studies within a European context, and how to move forward with collaboration and respect.

René Dietrich: I'm currently reflecting on how things have changed over the last 10-15 years in Native Studies, particularly in Europe. It seems that Native Studies in Europe is no longer isolated from what's happening globally, with Indigenous scholars and activists now playing a bigger role in shaping European perspectives. This wasn't as prevalent a decade ago. Would you agree that the field has become more transnational and integrated?

Chiara Minestrelli: Yes, there's definitely a move toward transnational collaboration, where Indigenous voices are increasingly shaping the field. The goal is to create spaces



and infrastructure for Indigenous perspectives to lead, rather than having European scholars dominate the conversation.

René Dietrich: In terms of institutionalizing Native Studies in Europe, it's different from places like Australia or North America, where you can get a degree in Indigenous Studies. How do you see this evolving in Europe? Does this shape your teaching of Native Studies in a broader context, especially for students who aren't pursuing degrees in this field?

Chiara Minestrelli: It's a complex issue, and I wouldn't actively promote Indigenous Studies degrees in Europe just yet. There are debates around Indigenous Studies even in settler-colonial environments, questioning its role as a discipline. In Europe, there are additional challenges. Instead, I think it's more about integrating Indigenous perspectives across different disciplines and ensuring that Indigenous scholars play a key role in shaping these conversations.

In my courses, I often use case studies on Indigenous struggles, representation, and media to highlight these issues. Collaborating with Indigenous scholars, even from a distance, can also be beneficial, though it has its challenges due to budgets and time differences. I believe that consultation and collaboration with Indigenous voices is key to moving forward, rather than rushing to create Indigenous Studies programs.

Also, when students are interested in Indigenous topics, it's important to push them to fully engage with the ethical responsibilities that come with it. It's not a one-off project, it requires commitment. If they're willing to do the hard work and remain humble, they can contribute meaningfully. This is something we're developing further at CISCs, with programs like the Lenape scholarship, but there's still room to grow in terms of supporting students.

René Dietrich: Yes, I agree. It's challenging to envision Indigenous Studies degrees in the UK, but it seems that engaging with Native Studies within various disciplines, rather

than as a standalone program, may be more fitting. It requires a transdisciplinary approach, collaborating across different fields.

Chiara Minestrelli: Absolutely. It's about working transnationally and transdisciplinarily, rather than in silos.

René Dietrich: Thank you for your insights, they've given me a lot to think about for the article. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss about Native Studies in Europe that I haven't asked?

Chiara Minestrelli: I think we've covered a lot of ground. There are still many ongoing conversations, but I'm excited about the future of Indigenous Studies in Europe. With that excitement comes responsibility—to ensure that we do things right and make the most of the opportunities and collaborations ahead.

Conversation with Janne Lahti: A Focus on Nordic (Settler) Colonialism, Transnational Connections, and the Question of Critical Distance

René Dietrich: Let's start with you talking about your own work and how you see its connection to the practice of doing Native Studies in Europe. Also, I'll return to this later, but to what degree do you see yourself as a Native Studies scholar versus a scholar of various forms of colonialism?

Janne Lahti: My background is in the history of the American West. My dissertation focused on the U.S. Army in the Arizona-New Mexico borderlands in the 1800s, looking at the Army as a colonizing community. I drew from postcolonial theory and applied those ideas to the U.S. Army. That goes back to 2009, with my book published in 2012 by the University of Nebraska Press. The Apache conflicts were a major part of that work. My second book delved deeper into the Apache and the U.S. Army, examining how they represented two different military cultures clashing in the borderlands.

In the last five to seven years, I've become more interested in global history, specifically in comparisons and connections between the U.S. West and other colonial spaces, like German Southwest Africa. Recently, I've also been studying Nordic



colonialism, particularly Finland's role. This is relatively new territory, but there's a growing interest in Finland's colonial history and legacy.

When I was growing up in Finland, colonialism was seen as something distant, something that happened far away and long ago. But I firmly believe that colonialism is still with us today, and we're living with its lasting impacts. We can see this in movements to topple monuments and in debates over repatriation, which have been hot topics here in Finland. For example, the Sámi people have been demanding their artifacts back. Last year, the National Museum returned a significant portion of its Sámi collection to the Sámi Museum in the north.

I recently took on the role of chief editor of the *Settler Colonial Studies* journal. I hesitated at first due to the extra workload, but I realized that as editor of a flagship journal in the field, I would gain valuable insights into where the field is headed, what scholars are questioning, what the next generation of researchers are doing. So, I felt it was worth it.

As for Native Studies, if you'd asked me 10 years ago, I would have identified more as a Native Studies scholar. Today, I primarily identify as a global historian and a historian of colonialism. During my dissertation, I was deeply involved in studying the Apache and became fascinated by how their society functioned, particularly in the 1800s. But Native Studies has changed a lot over the last decade. It's become more sensitive, and as a white European man doing Native Studies, you have to position yourself more carefully. It's become trickier. There's also the question of who gets to do this research, who has the right or capability to study Indigenous peoples?

Recently, while working on an article for *Settler Colonial Studies*, a peer reviewer noted that the author hadn't consulted any Indigenous literature or Indigenous communities. It raised the question of whether non-Indigenous scholars can still write on Indigenous topics without such consultation. Personally, I think there should be

space for different types of scholarship, but scholars need to be open about their positionality. I’m not Apache or Sámi, and I can’t speak for them, but I can study them as an outsider, as long as I’m transparent about who I am and what baggage I bring to the table.

Native Studies is getting more politicized, but there’s also greater visibility for Indigenous scholars in Finland. There’s a growing number of Sámi scholars, and more Indigenous voices are contributing to the academic landscape.

René Dietrich: There has always been some Sámi presence at NAISA conferences, and at this one [reference the annual NAISA conference of 2024], held in Sápmi, I expect it to be much stronger. What is your expectation there, how do you see their participation evolving, and what does it mean for Native Studies in Europe?

Janne Lahti: In Finland, there’s a growing number of new scholars—doctoral students and postdocs—who come from Sámi backgrounds. We’re seeing more and more of them, especially in history and Indigenous Studies programs. Historically, the Sámi have been at the forefront of colonial studies in Finland. For example, the Giellagas Institute at the University of Oulu has been specializing in Sámi studies for decades. A professor there, who recently retired, has been applying a colonial lens to his work for over 20 or 30 years. But, as historians, we’re relatively late to this discussion—especially when it comes to recognizing that Finland has its own colonial history.

When I talk about the recent turn toward colonialism in Finland, I’m referring to historians. What’s interesting is that the scholars focusing on Finland and colonialism often come from outside Finland. They’re usually trained in the history of the American West, the Mediterranean, the British Empire, German colonialism, or Russia. But the historians specifically trained in Finnish history aren’t engaging in these discussions. We’ve often wondered why.

For many of us researching colonialism, we notice patterns and phenomena, like boarding schools or assimilation policies, that mirror what happened in North America. Finland has had similar tendencies, discourses, and policies, which drew me into this



field of research. Yet, Finnish historians remain mostly absent from these discussions, and I have a few guesses as to why.

When I started researching colonialism about five or six years ago, I received different reactions. Some people advised me to stay away, saying it would be career suicide and could lead to trouble. This is partly due to Finland's political landscape, where the second-largest party today is a right-wing nationalist group. They often target historians on Twitter and other social media platforms.

Another tendency is to deny that colonialism applies to Finland. Some argue that it just doesn't fit, which reminds me of my experience doing research in Arizona. People there would say, "we didn't have colonialism here; the U.S. is exceptional." It seems everyone wants to see themselves as exceptional. There's also the idea that Finland was a victim of colonization, being part of the Russian Empire. While that's true, Finland was also involved in colonial ventures, like Russian activities in Alaska and even in places like Southwest Africa and King Leopold's ventures.

So, it's a strange dynamic. On one hand, colonialism is a politicized topic; on the other hand, Sámi scholars have long been applying colonial frameworks to their work on Finland. But Finnish historians, in general, are still not engaging with it.

René Dietrich: I was wondering about this broader trend in global history, particularly the links between Finnish and U.S. colonialism, or transnational perspectives on colonialism. From your perspective, do you see Native Studies becoming more integrated into Sámi scholarship? You also mentioned that one of the two professors of Indigenous Studies in Finland specializes in Latin American Indigenous peoples. Is there a growing connection between this and the broader Indigenous framework?

Janne Lahti: Yes, there's definitely more international collaboration happening now among Finnish scholars. We're seeing increased participation in networks like NAISA and in journals such as *Settler Colonial Studies* (SCS). For instance, the professor of

Indigenous Studies at the University of Lapland is part of the editorial team for SCS. So, Finnish scholars are reaching out more and becoming part of these global networks.

Take, for example, my research on Petsamo, a region in the Arctic Ocean that Finland controlled from the 1920s until it was lost to the Soviets after World War II. For 20 years, Petsamo was a multi-ethnic borderland with Sámi, Norwegians, Russians, Karelians, and Finns. It became the target of intense Finnish settler colonization, with efforts to assimilate the local populations through education and other colonial policies. This colonial history challenges the traditional narrative of Finland as a small nation that was only a victim of colonization, particularly by Russia. We were also colonizers, both in the Arctic North and in other parts of the world like North America and Africa.

This shift in perspective is part of a broader trend in academia, but it faces resistance from political forces in Finland. Our second-largest political party is an ultra-nationalist group, and they view these changes as a threat to the national story. They want to return to a narrative of Finland as a resilient nation that survived larger powers, rather than acknowledging our role as colonizers.

There's a similar dynamic in the U.S., where we're seeing more restrictions on what can be taught—avoiding discussions of racism or Native American genocide in favor of a more uplifting, unified national story. These same pressures are present in Finland today. But, on the other hand, the Sámi are becoming more visible in the media and political discourse. For example, the recent debate in Parliament over Sámi legislation, which addressed the question of who gets to decide who is Sámi—the Sámi Parliament or the Finnish courts—received significant attention.

These multilayered connections are crucial for Finnish scholars, particularly in Native Studies. Native Studies are deeply intertwined with political forces, and the discussions happening now are part of a larger, global conversation.



René Dietrich: I was curious about your new role as chief editor of *Settler Colonial Studies*. The journal has been around for now 14 years (the first issue came out in 2011), and I know there have been some changes. How do you see the journal evolving?

Janne Lahti: I was familiar with the journal and its founding editor, Lorenzo Veracini, having worked with him before. When I was approached by Taylor & Francis to take over, I had a Zoom call with Lorenzo, and he was very supportive. The journal had been going through a rough patch with the previous editorial board, but we felt it was important to keep it going because it's an important and relevant field.

Unfortunately, recent events, like the conflict in Gaza, show how relevant settler colonial studies still are. Understanding these processes is crucial for discussions around decolonizing Western knowledge and history, movements like Rhodes Must Fall or Black Lives Matter, and the broader cultural and political recalibration of our understanding of colonialism.

The field of settler colonial studies is evolving beyond the foundational theories of people like Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini. There's a lot of Anglo-centrism in the field, with a focus on places like North America, Australia, and New Zealand, which are seen as permanent settler colonies. But we need to expand this focus. For example, my research on Finnish Petsamo highlights the settler colonial ambitions of smaller states like Finland. We need to move beyond Anglo-centrism and explore different types of settler colonial projects, including those that may have "failed" or didn't endure in the same way.

René Dietrich: Thinking a bit more about settler colonial studies, there's something interesting to me about the field, particularly how it's been seen critically. Some works in Indigenous Studies highlight an Anglo focus, and you can also see that as redirecting attention to non-Native or European perspectives. But I also see a great potential in settler colonial studies because it brings back the focus to Europe in a different way:

It's not just about what's happening in the U.S. or Australia; it also addresses European complicity. We benefit from this, and we have our own colonial legacies connected to it, like Finland and Germany.

Janne Lahti: One of the big potentials of settler colonial studies is exploring these transnational connections. It's fascinating how different settler colonies, not just the established ones, were inspired by each other, borrowing knowledge and competing for dominance. The U.S. is a prime example of a massively successful settler colonial project. Other powers, like the French or Germans, looked at it with envy, viewing it as a model for colonization. The American West was almost a template for them. They thought, "this is how you do it, on a grand scale." Millions of white settlers took over the trans-Mississippi West in a generation! So, those connections and parallels really intrigue me, and I see a lot of potential in that scholarship moving forward.

René Dietrich: It shifts the focus back to Europe, too. It's important to see how these processes are interconnected, and it doesn't let anyone off the hook easily. There's this identification with Native peoples in European culture, almost as if it absolves European guilt about their colonial histories. It's like a way to see oneself as the underdog, while ignoring the complicity in those histories. Indigenous Studies in Europe is changing, too, showing how these issues connect back to our own colonial legacies and practices that still shape society today.

Janne Lahti: One critique of settler colonial studies is that it can be too mechanical, heavily influenced by Patrick Wolfe's ideas. He frames it as an ongoing structure, which can feel totalizing. While that perspective makes sense, settler colonialism is much more contested, negotiated, and fragile than that. It's not just a linear process; many visions and ambitions have failed, and Indigenous peoples are not merely victims waiting to be eliminated. They're active participants in these processes, challenging the dynamics.

So, getting rid of simplistic definitions of the logic of elimination that Wolfe introduced is crucial. While he acknowledged that elimination takes many forms, we



need to delve deeper into these historical processes. It's about recognizing personal agency and the negotiations at play, rather than reducing everything to just elimination. I think that's an important direction for future scholarship.

One radical idea to consider is whether Indigenous peoples can be seen as settler colonial themselves. Could their expansions be evaluated as forms of settler colonial expansion? I know that proposing this could invite backlash from Indigenous communities since many would say, "we are not settler colonial." But when you think about groups like the Lakota or the Comanche on the Great Plains, they were replacing previous inhabitants and kind of substituting them. They were doing what settler colonialists often do. There are other Indigenous communities that have done similar things. I'm not saying we should definitely frame it this way, but maybe it's worth considering Indigenous participation in these processes. It could be a scholarly risk, especially for a white man making those claims. Still, I'm intrigued by the idea: can Indigenous expansionism be framed as settler colonialism as well?

René Dietrich: There might need to be some kind of racializing aspect to limit that perspective. These are complex and interesting questions, but they might also point out the potential boundaries where a framework such as settler colonialism can fully apply.

Janne Lahti: They are definitely political questions. When people talk about colonialism and settler colonialism, some interpret that as an accusation, like scholars are discrediting their ancestors. Many might say, "my grandfather was not a colonizer," or "my ancestors were not part of those ugly, violent processes." People outside academia often react as if we're accusing them of something. When we use terms like colonial or settler colonial, it can feel like we're blaming their ancestors for history. Among the general public, there's this dichotomy of seeing history as either good or bad: there's good history, with uplifting national narratives, and then there's bad

history, like racism, colonization, and genocide. They often miss the fact that these histories are intertwined. There are many sides to these stories, and history is made up of encounters and negotiations that don't fit neatly into boxes or stereotypes.

René Dietrich: One of the last articles I found that discusses the current state of Native Studies in Europe from 2010, primarily focuses on literary and cultural studies. In the article, Deborah Madsen mentions that Native Studies in Europe often takes a multi-ethnic approach, treating it as one ethnicity among others. Some people do Ethnic Studies in American literary contexts, looking at Native literature alongside other ethnic literatures. But I think that's changing, and from my perspective, Indigeneity has shifted from being viewed purely as an ethnic position to being seen more in terms of colonialism and its connections to racialization.

Janne Lahti: I completely agree. It's become more mainstream in discussions about colonial histories here in Finland. More teaching is being done on colonialism, and part of that includes aspects of racialization. In Finland, we also have our Indigenous people, the Sámi. The introduction of Sámi studies has created more connections between those working in Native American Studies and those in Sámi Studies. There's definitely more collaboration now than there was 20 years ago. In Finland, we have a strong tradition of studying the American West, and Native American Studies has been part of that area focus. Indigenous Studies and Sámi Studies used to be separate, but not anymore. There's a growing inclusion of Native Studies in various fields, especially in migration history, and institutes in Finland, like the Migration Institute in Turku, are focusing more on colonialism. There are also Indigenous Studies professorships in Sámi Studies that are gradually branching out to be more inclusive in their perspectives. So, in a sense, Native Studies is becoming part of a more diverse scholarly, interdisciplinary field.

Conversation with Janna Maresova: Central European Perspectives, Stereotypes, and the Question of European Limitations



René Dietrich: Thank you for taking the time to discuss the state of Native Studies in Europe. I thought it would be interesting to gather perspectives from various parts of Europe and people involved in different ways. To start, could you talk about your work and how you got into Native Studies? I'd also love to hear how your PhD and the recent volume you co-edited connect to these questions.

Jana Maresova: During my Master's program in British and Commonwealth Studies, I encountered Canadian literature and Indigenous literature, particularly through Klára Kolinská who organized a workshop on American Indian Studies in Prague. I was a student at the time, helping with the organization, and that sparked my interest in Indigenous literature.

At the workshop, I had a conversation with Tomson Highway, a renowned Indigenous author and musician. Our shared interest in music created a connection, which inspired me to write my Master's thesis on his plays, exploring the narrative techniques and the musical elements within them. I then decided to continue this topic for my PhD, where I examined how the oral storytelling traditions in Indigenous cultures are reflected in contemporary Canadian Indigenous novels.

As a literary scholar, I am primarily focused on literature. However, I believe there is a pressing need for a general understanding of Indigenous cultures in Central Europe today. Stereotypes remain deeply entrenched and often reflect 19th-century views. This motivated us to edit a volume that addresses these stereotypes as a starting point.

In the future, I aim to combat these stereotypes and educate the general public about current Indigenous issues, making Indigenous voices more prominent and visible in Central Europe. It's essential for people to recognize that those stereotypes are outdated, constructed, and do not accurately represent contemporary Indigenous cultures. Raising awareness about this is crucial.

René Dietrich: I would like to discuss the book (Kolinska, Runtić, and Marešová, *(Un)Following in Winnetou's Footsteps; Representations of North American Indigeneity in Central Europe*, 2024), which I understand emerged from two conferences, one in Canada and another in the Czech Republic. I'm curious about its origins. I found it fascinating how the Winnetou trope is strong and expands from Germany to other countries, taking on a life of its own with unique functions. Could you elaborate on the book's origins and the role of Central Europe in shaping perceptions of North American Indigeneity? How is this perceived today?

Jana Maresova: The perception of Indigeneity and the associated stereotypes are issues we grapple with daily in Indigenous Studies. In my experience, the general public's knowledge is quite limited. For example, while some people may be aware of residential schools, their understanding often stops there. When I mention my research, I frequently encounter reactions like, "there are still Indigenous people in Canada?" or "they write literature?" This lack of knowledge has been something I've contemplated for years.

The conference in Edmonton, organized by the Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies, specifically focused on the concept of the "imaginary Indian." That's where Klára and I met Sonia, who was also involved. Klára proposed a follow-up to the Edmonton conference, and we worked together to create a call for papers. We reached out to scholars in Central Europe to contribute to the volume.

The issues surrounding Indigenous representation are particularly relevant not only in Germany and German-speaking countries, where stereotypes remain prevalent, but also in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. Although we didn't receive papers from Slovakia or Hungary, it's important to note that the Winnetou films have been very popular there for decades, further complicating these stereotypes.

I was also surprised by the Italian perspective; particularly how fascist regimes have historically utilized these stereotypes. This evolution of the "imaginary Indian"



throughout the 20th century—from fascism to communism—has been fascinating to explore.

It took us several years to compile the volume due to the usual delays in academia, compounded by COVID-19. I wanted to include an Indigenous perspective, which is why I conducted an interview with Bruce Sinclair (Métis) for the book. His insights into how Indigenous peoples perceive their representation in European cultures were invaluable.

René Dietrich: During your PhD, you also spent some time in Canada. How did that longer research stay compare to your experiences in Europe? Did it change your perspective or introduce new viewpoints?

Jana Maresova: Oh, absolutely! It was like night and day for me. When I started my PhD, I was the only student in the entire Czech Republic focused on Indigenous literatures. There were only two other scholars involved in the field, Klára and Martina in Brno. This left me with very few opportunities to discuss the topic with colleagues, and resources were extremely limited.

Initially, I felt that my research topic was vastly different from what I eventually pursued. Back then, around twelve years ago, Indigenous Studies in Europe seemed stuck in the past, drawing primarily from the work done in the 1980s and 1990s.

When I arrived in Edmonton for my Doctoral Fellowship at the Wirth Institute, I was shocked by how much more there was to learn. Indigenous theory and literary criticism were just beginning to emerge, and I encountered topics like Indigenous resurgence and the revitalization of Indigenous languages. I quickly realized that I needed to catch up on about twenty years of research. Whenever I presented my work in Canada, I often felt like I was on the level of a Bachelor's student, despite being a PhD candidate, simply because the resources available in Europe were still so limited.

René Dietrich: Do you sense that things are changing in Europe? For example, the American Indian Workshop has created a platform that connects Native Studies in Europe. This year [2024] the first NAISA conference is taking place in Norway. Are you seeing more connections forming, or a sense of Europe catching up to larger discourses and debates, even if it's not at the same level as Canada or the U.S.?

Jana Maresova: Yes, I believe so. The American Indian Workshop and similar organizations are definitely helping to bridge gaps. I feel that the field is improving and becoming more connected. However, it still relies on just a few individuals in Europe, making it challenging to establish a broader foundation for Indigenous Studies.

Moreover, universities in Europe don't seem particularly eager to expand Indigenous Studies, as it's often viewed as a minor area of focus in general academic discourse. From a scholarly perspective, communication has improved, as evidenced by our collaborative volume. We are starting to connect better, but I wonder if these efforts will lead to significant changes in university programs for future generations.

Currently, the field is quite small, so we need to raise general awareness first. By increasing interest, we can attract more students and gradually build a stronger foundation. There are certainly more resources available now, and communication between Canadian Indigenous scholars and European scholars has improved significantly, which is encouraging. I've also noticed some Indigenous scholars traveling to Europe for exchanges, which is a positive development.

René Dietrich: With the recent focus on movements like Black Lives Matter, there's been a renewed confrontation with European colonial legacies, which are often intertwined with settler colonialism. Do you think this renewed focus, including discussions on cultural appropriation, could impact Native Studies in Europe? How can we address these broader colonial legacies beyond just the concept of the "imaginary Indian"?

Jana Maresova: Absolutely, the "imaginary Indian" is a fruitful topic to discuss with students in Central Europe. People know about colonization in a historical sense but



often don't see it as their issue. I try to explain that we, too, have been part of the colonization process; it's not just a problem for countries like Britain.

This understanding is crucial when discussing Indigeneity and stereotypes, which reflect ongoing colonial attitudes and cultural appropriation. However, conveying this idea can be challenging because many believe that Central Europe is unaffected by these issues.

Settler colonialism, land acknowledgments, and similar concepts are essential for scholars and students to understand, even if they can be difficult to grasp from a Central European perspective. As a non-Indigenous scholar, I've struggled with my role in this conversation. I often feel conflicted about lecturing on these topics, but I see myself as a mediator between two worlds.

It's vital to have strong connections with Indigenous scholars and communities so we can bring their perspectives into the discussion. I try to be mindful of my position in research, working to avoid speaking for Indigenous peoples. It's a delicate balance to strike, but it's crucial to ensure that Indigenous voices are heard and represented accurately.

René Dietrich: You mentioned some dangers involved in your work. Could you elaborate on what you see as particularly risky, especially when it comes to representing Indigenous perspectives?

Jana Maresova: Absolutely, for me, it's very personal. I'm conscious that I don't want to speak for Indigenous people or issues. While we were editing our volume, I realized, almost at the end, that we hadn't included Indigenous perspectives. I thought, "this isn't right; I don't want my research to come off as speaking for them." That realization really struck me, so I decided to interview Bruce. I've been wrestling with this issue for a while.

In Central Europe, the general knowledge of Indigenous Studies is quite limited, and as one of the few who can discuss the current state of these studies, it often places

me in a position of knowledge and power. However, I have to remind myself that there are issues I shouldn't speak on, that some things must be learned directly from Indigenous people. It's a tricky balance, I need to educate people about Indigenous issues while also encouraging them to seek knowledge from the source itself.

René Dietrich: For a long time, Native Studies seemed to be viewed as just another part of broader ethnic or multicultural studies, addressing questions of equality and inclusion. Deborah Madsen mentioned this in her essay about Native Studies in Europe, noting the strong multi-ethnic approach that has been prevalent since around 2010. From your perspective, has that perception changed? Are scholars or teaching methods shifting, or is Indigenous Studies still largely seen through that multi-ethnic lens?

Jana Maresova: I'd say it's still pretty much the same. Indigenous texts are often treated like a minority literature, which makes it challenging to elevate the field. However, from a scholarly perspective, I think there's a growing awareness that Indigenous Studies involves unique theories and histories distinct from other minority cultures.

Scholars recognize that while there are overlaps in issues of race and colonialism, Indigenous cultures have specific histories and contexts that necessitate a different approach. I see a rise in awareness regarding Indigenous theories, and we're striving to teach Indigenous Studies from that standpoint rather than simply lumping it into a broader multi-ethnic framework. Indigenous theories have their own richness, and I believe they should be taught in a way that highlights those distinctions.

Reflecting on the Conversations

In reflecting on my conversations with Chiara Minestrelli, Janne Lahti, and Jana Maresova, I want to focus on the multifaceted roles that Europe as a site for practicing Indigenous Studies occupies within their conversations and, in a wider sense, in the evolving landscape of the field. For Chiara Minestrelli, Europe and being a European scholar of Indigenous studies take on a number of different meanings when



considering her personal and academic journey, in turn pointing to wider questions of practicing? Indigenous Studies in Europe.

Beginning her PhD in Italy, Minestrelli found that European academic settings lacked sufficient self-reflection and could not provide for a meaningful collaboration with Indigenous communities. She therefore decided to leave it behind and start again in Australia in order to pursue her PhD in a more strongly ethically grounded and actively collaborative way.

In Australia, “Europe” and being “European” afforded Minestrelli an outsider status which indicates two directions: it liberated her from the position of a settler, which other non-Indigenous scholars from Australia still occupy. At the same time, her positionality as a white, European woman required constant reflection on how her background shaped her and her research. Being European in a place like Australia thus positioned her outside of a settler-native binary while throwing into clear relief the coloniality her position still holds in these contexts. Whereas studying in Europe, especially as Minestrelli perceives the academic and institutional reception of Indigenous Studies in 2010, was a hindrance to doing meaningful Indigenous Studies, being European in an international context appears to have afforded her a unique position in which positional differences and relations could be navigated in a different manner.

Back in Europe and the UK (via the US), “Europe” is clearly characterized by Minestrelli as “the heart of empire”. From this, she derives a particular responsibility in how to engage practices of Indigenous Studies and thematic focusses such as the repatriation of cultural patrimony. Central to Minestrelli’s argument is the importance of working collaboratively *with* Indigenous communities and scholars rather than merely conducting research *about* them. For her, the ethics of doing Indigenous Studies in a non-settler imperial space calls for practices in which “Europe” is defined



by aspiring to be site for meaningful collaboration with Indigenous communities. Following this direction, European institutions such as CISCs can become facilitators for Indigenous voices from communities and academia, prioritizing Indigenous agendas in academic discourse, and thus providing a path for a decolonial practice of Indigenous Studies in Europe.

From Minestrelli's perspective, the most viable and future-oriented methodologies for conducting Indigenous Studies in Europe in the 2020s are intimately tied to one's positionality and self-reflection as a European scholar. Quite fittingly, such an approach aligns with the role an institution like the Centre for Indigenous and Settler Colonial Studies takes on, as a hub that seeks to initiate projects of collaboration that center Indigenous voices as well as their scholarly and activist interests.

In **Janne Lahti's** conversation, Europe is a place to be interrogated for its own imperial history as well as for ongoing settler-colonial practices within its borders. In addition, however, the conversation with Lahti poses the more charged question of the politicization of Indigenous Studies itself, and what consequences may arise from that for those invested in Indigenous Studies methods whilst working from a European perspective. Focusing on Finland, Lahti challenges the notion of the country as a peripheral or non-colonial state by examining its historical involvement in colonial ventures, particularly towards the Sámi. His work thus emphasizes the need to broaden the conversation around settler colonialism, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that transcends an Anglo-centric historic focus in Native Studies and calls for more investigations of transnational connections.

However, Lahti's perspective also touches upon what he sees as the increasing politicization of Indigenous Studies, particularly in the context of European scholarship. To him, the field has become more sensitive and politically charged, and he sees the proximity of politics and scholarship putting the work of non-Native European scholars under stronger scrutiny, thus risking the merits that might come from critical distance.



While I can understand where Lahti is coming from, this part of the conversation also raised critical questions for me: how do we reconfigure a European scholarship which has historically served ongoing colonial legacy that complicates any assumed position of objectivity or critical distance? Is a hesitation or choice not to engage in questions that risk confusing settler colonization and the varied politics of Indigenous sovereignty an actual limitation on scholarship? Or are such considerations central to a form of scholarship that can only offer meaningful contributions when aware of its ethical stakes in a world in which colonial processes and strategies of delegitimization against Native peoples are ongoing?

As scholars seek to engage with Indigenous issues from Europe, I see a need to consider the implications of both academia and advocacy, and while the questions that arise from straddling both are never easy to answer, in my work I fall on the side of an ethically engaged scholarship, while also being convinced that academia has a different interest in its knowledge production than merely replicating or confirming political positions; even if one agrees with them. With this in mind, Lahti's reflections prompt further exploration of how these dynamics influence the question of conducting and institutionalizing Indigenous Studies in Europe, especially as the field continues to develop and grapple with the legacies of empire and the responsibilities of scholars to engage with these histories in an ethical and responsible manner. This also includes a focus on Indigenous European voices such as those of Sámi scholars. NAISA 2024 being held in Sápmi is one important step in this direction— and while in other contexts there are sometimes disciplinary boundaries to establish larger and more sustained conversations between Indigenous Studies focused on North America, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand and Sámi Studies (and I do not omit my own choice in interview partners here from this), I believe a strong Indigenous Studies in Europe needs to build and foster these spaces more strongly.

The conversation with **Jana Maresova** shifted the focus on Europe yet again slightly. Talking with her highlighted the entrenched stereotypes and limited institutional support that make advancing the field particularly challenging in regions where colonialism and Indigeneity are often seen as distant issues. Maresova’s own academic journey, which began with exposure to Indigenous literatures in Canada, revealed both the transformative potential of such work and the hurdles of fostering awareness back in Central Europe.

As a co-editor of the recent volume *(Un)Following in Winnetou’s Footsteps*, one focus of Maresova’s work is her emphasis on dismantling romanticized stereotypes of Native peoples – depictions that still dominate European and settler imaginations and perpetuate the idea of Indigenous cultures as static or solely historical. This line of inquiry opens a genuinely European perspective on issues of Indigeneity. Similar work is being done in Germany (Hartmut Lutz) and other European contexts, in which scholars are interrogating the ongoing impact of colonial fantasies (Stirrup/McKay). For Maresova, too, addressing these stereotypes isn’t just about correcting misconceptions; it’s a way to bring Europe itself into conversations within Indigenous studies, reflecting on the region’s complicity in shaping these narratives– a complicity which cannot be disconnected from Europe’s broader colonial legacies.

Partly motivated by her time in Canada, Maresova also underscored the importance of promoting contemporary Indigenous cultures within European discourses, not just as a counter to stereotypes but as a way to amplify present-day Indigenous voices and experiences. Like Janne Lahti, Maresova made clear that non-Indigenous scholars should not attempt to speak for Indigenous scholars, yet her conclusion was somewhat different. She saw the absence of Native voices as a lack that needed to be addressed, and, similar to Minestrelli, she emphasized the importance of centering Indigenous perspectives through genuine collaboration.

For Maresova, more collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and a push for a more methodologically sound and ethically grounded



approach to Indigenous Studies in Europe are the means to advance the field meaningfully. This approach, in my view, which resonates both with Minestralli and Lahti, also offers a further way to "put the focus on Europe" in Indigenous Studies – not as a detached observer but as an active site grappling with its own histories and responsibilities.

Implications for Native Studies in Europe

The conversations I engaged in for this piece became a means to think about conducting Indigenous Studies in Europe from various perspectives and revealed the challenges but also the opportunities for those working in this field in the current moment. If Europe is to position itself meaningfully within the broader field of Indigenous Studies, it must actively confront its colonial legacies and reimagine its role as both a site of critical scholarship and a participant in decolonial practices. Taken together, these conversations show that Europe cannot be a passive or neutral ground for Indigenous Studies; rather, it must be a space where historical complicity is acknowledged and where scholarship strives to amplify Indigenous perspectives in ethical and collaborative ways.

What consequences does this have for practicing Native Studies in Europe today? One implication of these reflections is the pressing need for European scholars to critically engage with positionality and ethical responsibility. As Minestralli emphasized, European scholars must interrogate the power dynamics inherent in their roles – both as inheritors of colonial histories and as potential collaborators in decolonial projects. Europe's imperial past and ongoing neo-colonial present gives it a particular responsibility, not only to deconstruct its colonial fantasies, as Maresova argues, but also to create academic spaces that prioritize Indigenous agendas, as we can see in institutions like CISCs, or in forums of exchange like AIW. At the same time,

in the program of the AIW conferences we can also identify the problem that it is often a space in which European scholars of American Indian literatures and cultures network amongst each other, with a few additions from North America, including Indigenous scholars. While I see no easy way to change this (and logistical and travel issues are a major part of this), it might signal the need to also rethink and transform institutions such as AIW by thinking about Indigenous Studies more transnationally and across disciplinary boundaries, including proactively centering Indigenous voices. For instance, consciously including Sámi studies and Sámi scholars, or working more closely with North American networks such as the Indigenous Literary Studies Association (ILSA). All of this is to say that a European approach to Indigenous Studies must be grounded in critical self-reflection, collaboration, and a commitment to centering Indigenous voices and methodologies.

The field also calls for innovation in addressing the stereotypes and colonial narratives that still pervade European imaginaries. As Maresova highlights, dismantling romanticized or static views of Native peoples is not just a corrective measure – it is essential to fostering a contemporary and dynamic understanding of Indigenous cultures. On the one hand, we can see strong academic investigations of these issues in Germany and in different parts of Europe; on the other hand, the limits of public debates are also apparent. For instance, the debate following the decision of the Ravensburger Verlag publishing house to pull two newly released books relating to a 2022 film based on Karl May's *Winnetou* series shows the unwillingness of much of the public to meaningfully address these issues (see Kolinska, Runtić and Marešová's introduction for a more detailed discussion). We can see a similar kind of hostile pushback in parts of Finnish society, as well, when confronted with their own colonial legacy, as Lahti pointed out. While such opposition might be frustrating, they can also function as a motivator to examine these European colonial complicities further, moving beyond Anglo-centric perspectives and expanding the scope of settler colonial studies to include Europe's role in these systems.



These reflections suggest a critical balancing act between scholarship and advocacy. While Lahti raised concerns about the increasing political orientation of Indigenous Studies—also understanding himself less as an Indigenous Studies scholar than a historian of colonialism—I ultimately see the consideration of the political ground on which European Indigenous Studies takes place as imperative for meaningfully engaging with questions of Indigeneity and colonialism in Europe. European scholars must navigate the ethical stakes of their research, ensuring that their work is not only rigorous but also responsive to ongoing colonial processes. At the same time, academia should produce knowledge that challenges assumptions and deepens understanding, so that the result of an academic inquiry is not merely a confirmation of political positions that one supported already beforehand. Ideally, this dual focus—on ethical engagement and scholarly inquiry—can be a way to define European contributions to Indigenous Studies in the 21st century.

In conclusion, these conversations reveal a shared priority: to make Europe not just a site of scholarship but a space of accountability and collaboration in Indigenous Studies. By acknowledging Europe's colonial legacies, challenging entrenched stereotypes, and fostering meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities, scholars can ensure that the field continues to grow in ways that are both innovative and responsible. This might not always occur on a large, institutionalized scale. While I believe that the field has developed significantly since Madsen assessed the state of Indigenous literary studies in Europe in 2010, the greater hindrances to formal institutionalization on a university level remain. This makes the continuation and increasing of networking between scholars all the more important, and can engender a more decentralized, looser form of institutionalization, as apparent in the recent establishment of the Network for Teaching Indigenous Studies in Europe (N-TISE), which held its first hybrid workshop in November 2024 in Bremen. This vision for the

potential of Indigenous Studies in Europe aligns with the broader goals outlined in the introduction to this 10th anniversary special issue, emphasizing the need for a reflective and future-oriented approach to Indigenous Studies— one that not only engages with Europe's past but also contributes to a more ethical and inclusive scholarly practice in the present and future.

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REFLECTION

“Late 20th Century Indigenous Literature at Haskell”

DENISE LOW

At Haskell in 1984 and Before

Before I went into my first class at Haskell Indian Junior College (now Haskell Indian Nations University), my colleagues warned me, “Don’t expect much.” They explained how the students, mostly from reservations, had poor backgrounds and would fail. This was the prevailing attitude in those days—and my colleagues were evenly split between Native and non-Native. None had interest in N. Scott Momaday, who had won the Pulitzer in 1969 and championed Indigenous oral traditions. None followed the early careers of Leslie Marmon Silko and Joy Harjo. I had discovered Momaday’s novel *House Made of Dawn* on my own and appreciated the book’s innovative structures and spirituality. Bernard Hirsch at the University of Kansas, two miles away, taught contemporary Native writers and promoted them in academic articles. He mentored my teaching of a Native literature class at the University of Kansas, about the same time he was chairing the poet and artist Gwen Westerman’s doctoral work. I felt lucky in 1984 to find a permanent position at Haskell, but my colleagues’ reservations about

emerging Native writers surprised me. "Paradox" describes all my time at Haskell, but to select one strand of this complex web, here is a personal sampling of "Albuquerque Renaissance" and other early Native literatures at an all-Native college from the mid-1980s through the 1990s.

Indigenous authors' innovations in mainstream English-language literary forms may seem dated now and obvious, but just Momaday's insistence on the legitimacy of orally transmitted literature was huge. Gerald Vizenor added journalistic and then literary critique to his position that oral histories were as valid as western European literacy. In his *Wordarrows*, he discussed the legal standing and precedents of spoken documentation. This attacked the anthropologists' idea of primitivism, no small thing in the 20th century.

Other exceptional ideas from Indigenous sources first seen in United States publications during this era were history-as-contemporaneous presence; prose written in a lyrical style; hybridity and multiple-genre texts; nonlinear plot and verse structures; transformative experiences; and use of Native languages. Native writers introduced several of these approaches simultaneously, like Momaday. All depended on English, what Joy Harjo has termed the "enemy's language," even if modified by Native syntax, vocabulary, and forms (Harjo, *Reinventing*).

In 1984, little predicted the arrival of a sequence of literary "waves"—as Erika Wurth has labeled them, with pre-Albuquerque renaissance as the first wave, and 1968 as the beginning of the second—a period of Native-produced texts in major publications (2016). This era was not directly related to the American Indian Movement's activism, which was founded in 1968 in Minneapolis, after Momaday's early works were already published. The attainment of civil rights suggested political equalities, but academic and publishing institutions were slow to change established practices. Slow inroads occurred.

Montana author James Welch, Blackfeet and Gros Ventre, published with New York houses in the early 1970s: *Riding the Earthboy* (1971), poetry, and the novel *Winter in the Blood* (1974). Both Welch and Momaday wrote at intersections of tribal



histories and contemporary times. Their narratives and verse were informed by traditions yet co-current with present-day Native experience, not lost in the past with the “disappearing Indian” trope. Haskell students in the rodeo club in the 1980s wore belt buckles with a dying “Indian” on a horse, as I recall. Its anachronism was unquestioned at the time. This echoed the acceptance of diminishing Native populations even by Indigenous people themselves. The 1960s-1980s writers proved them wrong.

Momaday, Welch, and others disrupted the ethnographic-style “as-told-to” autobiographies that were favored by publishing houses. They reinvented the genre of historical fiction to fit Native perspectives, with ruptured timelines and contemporaneous sacred powers. I spent a lonely Christmas holiday in my office (I had not yet accrued any vacation time) reading *Winter in the Blood*. Its transformative arc, humor, connections to family and tribal history—all lifted me out of my probationary federal-job funk. Its publisher, Harper & Row, had a new Native American series, which came to include Momaday’s poetry and prose, Duane Niatum’s own poetry, and later, Niatum’s anthology of poetry *Carriers of the Dream Wheel*.

Momaday continued to publish poetry and prose informed by Kiowa and Southwest Native traditions, and I bought each volume as it appeared. Albuquerque-area writers influenced by Momaday had work in Kenneth Rosen’s seminal anthology *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* (1977). This included Simon Ortiz, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Anna Lee Walters.

Additions to Native literatures continued. Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977) and *Storyteller* (1981) made a huge impact for their textual hybridity, themes, integration of dance (Tayo’s directions on the mountain in *Ceremony*), photography, and other non-verbal narrative forms. Turtle Mountain Ojibwe author Louise Erdrich won a National Book Critics Circle Award for *Love Medicine* (1984), which had linked short stories and

tribal history. All these early authors continued to publish books in the next decades. Yet none of these 1970s-1980s works was available to Haskell students. A small community of admirers, scholars, and writers followed each addition to the canon. Some like Robert Nelson, Peter Beidler, and Gwen Westerman were involved in Association for the Study of American Indian Literature (ASAIL), founded in 1971. At Haskell I typed out and ditto-copied book excerpts for students, who responded actively to these tribal writers.

Continuing Erasure: Manual Training, Not Education

The boarding school milieu has relevance to the evolution of Native literatures, including the delayed timeline. Haskell Institute, founded in 1884 as a boarding school, emphasized vocational programs, like all such institutions. In addition to school training and farming, students were allocated to local townspeople during the summers as unpaid domestic help (girls) and farm labor (boys). My mother-in-law Frances (Weso) Walker told me she refused to take part in this program, and she left Haskell after a short stay. Through the years, I heard many Haskell alumni recount their experiences. Some boys were assigned to pump gas in breech cloths at a local teepee-like gas station. Their wages went to Haskell's administration and were not tracked by the government. Haskell also ran a restaurant that townspeople patronized—another income stream for Haskell administration. The students raised the produce and livestock as part of their education, and the best went to the restaurant, not their own chow. Educating students in the liberal arts, mathematics, and sciences would cut into profits, because of hiring faculty and loss of time, so few students had the basic curriculum to transfer to four-year colleges. During my first years at Haskell, the automotive department performed repairs for in-group staff for free. Money earned from townspeople's car repairs was unaccounted for. The supervisor was a Native person. Manual training was institutionalized child labor and profitable for whoever was in control, even after the Bureau of Indian Affairs became led by Indigenous administrators.



Exclusion of Natives from a full college curriculum is a long-term, detrimental effect of boarding school that needs to be noted. Besides a handful of heavily edited writers like D'Arcy McNickle, John Rollins Ridge, Charles Eastman, and Zitkala Sa/Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, very few Native writers had book or article publications before Momaday. This erasure of voice is a profound loss. It is taking decades to reverse.

Respect to the Ponca Powwow Tradition and a Nod to Plains Indian Ledger Art

During my early Haskell years I tried to find Native-produced texts, and this led to shifting from western literary definitions. My acquaintance with a professor at South Carolina, Jim Charles, helped me understand how encoded history in powwow songs is a way that Indigenous narratives survived. He told me how as a teenager in Oklahoma, he had danced with a well-known Ponca family and learned the encoded histories. Ponca people were among the first to develop powwow dances, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, and their songs are known across the Great Plains. Charles' article "Songs of the Ponca: Haluska" (1989) documents specific subversive rhythms, melodies, sequences, and texts that preserve stories of Ponca victories over the United States Army.

The lyrics of Ponca ceremonial songs are brief, and often the stanzas are filled out in vocables rather than words—so they were not apparently in a Native language if a white instructor were listening. Out of one-hundred *Helushka* songs, twenty-five are entirely vocables, according to Charles. Yet even the vocable songs suggest larger narratives. The musical phrases and brief syllables are like the pictographs of painted winter count calendars, each of which signifies a larger cycle of oral texts. One *Helushka* song, comprised of one sentence, is about the fearsomeness of a man's horse going into battle. The accompanying dance—along with the drumming, melody, syllables,

and words—suggests the vigor of the war horse, courage, the warrior’s mission to win honor, the importance of the horse to the Ponca way of life, the history of how Poncas got horses from the Comanches, and a particular plant that increases a horse’s speed. While boarding schools punished students for using their languages, they allowed the powwow songs with no words. This was a brilliant and vital way to sustain the lineage of orally transmitted knowledge. When Haskell students familiar with the genre of powwow songs considered them as literary texts in class, another direction of appreciation opened for them and for me.

What I learned from Charles led to my explorations of Plains ledger art as an alternative form of literacy, performed differently from alphabetic texts but valid, nonetheless (Low, *SAIL*). I integrated ledger art texts, including winter counts, into my Haskell classes as I learned the genre. With improving technology, these visual pieces became more accessible. Now the Smithsonian posts extensive winter counts on their website. Plains Indian Ledger Art, a website supported by Ross Frank and the University of California-San Diego, hosts over forty ledgers. All of these are primary, Native-produced documents worthy of further use in Native studies. While Indigenous Americans were not publishing books during the early part of the 20th century, they nonetheless produced literary texts.

At Haskell in 1984, Textbooks

After my first class meetings at Haskell, I despaired not over the students, but the inappropriate textbooks. These were stocked by the library and issued to students each semester. The library had stacks of *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fennimore Cooper. More contemporary writers were Frank Waters, Mari Sandoz, Ruth Beebe Hill, and Forrest (Asa) Carter—all non-Indigenous authors who wrote on Native themes, fraudulently in the case of Carter.

A few library anthologies included translations of traditional verse and orations for classroom use. One was *Literature of the American Indian* (Sanders, 1976). This collected traditional oral accounts, songs, the Haudenosaunee *Great Law of Peace*,



orations, and even snippets from a few contemporary writers like Momaday and Vine Deloria, Jr. Students appreciated these works. One of the problems with these anthologies, as elders at Haskell let me know, was some inappropriate sharing of sacred stories, especially creation accounts. I learned to choose class assignments carefully.

Another important source of traditional texts was *The Portable North American Indian Reader* (1974), with orations, early writings of William Apess, Zitkala Sa/Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, and Luther Standing Bear, plus selections from Momaday, Deloria, Welch, and Ortiz. Especially the orations, even if imperfectly translated, gave students some tribal rhetorical models.

Bison Books of the University of Nebraska Press was beginning to publish Native books as I started my tenure at Haskell. They had issued histories and tribal tales in the 1960s, and in 1979, they published a reprint of *Black Elk Speaks*, with an introduction by Deloria. This book included information that, students told me, was important recuperation of information, despite the problematic editing of John Neihardt. I learned to listen to students' evaluations about the conflicted texts that did reach print, and many expressed appreciation. Later, relatives of Black Elk told me how he had taught traditional ways to Lakotas in his role of a Catholic catechist. This privileged position as a Catholic officiant allowed him to travel around Pine Ridge more freely than others. When the Sun Dance was made legal after passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978), enough people still knew the ritual details to proceed with the ceremony.

Bison Books presented works of other Lakota and Dakota people from earlier times, never before published or published only in limited editions. These included: Charles Eastman's *The Soul of the Indian* (1980); books by Gertrude Bonnin/Zitkala Za (1985), and *Waterlily* by Ella Cara Deloria (1988). An aside: Ella Cara Deloria was on the

staff of Haskell for a few years as a young woman. As these Bison Books became available, I ordered them as new textbooks. *Waterlily* was an especially important publication because of its descriptions of traditional women's roles, rare in the other available texts. This book was a companion to Black Elk's account of men's roles.

Publisher Heroes of the 1970s-1980s

Within weeks of my arrival at Haskell, their centennial committee sponsored a literary program in the student union, with personal appearances of Joe Bruchac, Lance Henson, and Paula Gunn Allen. The grant required a representative from the Haskell English Department for one of the panels. My new colleagues insisted I take this on—as the faculty member with the least standing. I prepared some notes, brushed my hair, and sat like a sacrificial lamb amidst these giants. My upbringing in southeast Kansas—among many people of mixed heritage (including my grandfathers) and some enrolled Indians—included training in social protocols. I knew enough to keep my mouth shut and to let my betters speak. They did. Finally, with five minutes left, Bruchac turned to me. I read off my notes and included thank yous. This brevity gained me admittance to the after-party, where I delighted in the good company of these visitors and their stories. I learned a lot from each.

Henson's reading of his poems at that conference, and his explanations, impacted me greatly. I appreciated his skilled compressed lines, use of Cheyenne language, and content. He further inspired my research into Plains Indian ledger art with his bilingual poem about Fort Robinson Breakout hero Littlefingernail (*Circling*). I continue contact with him through his occasional poems in Facebook posts as an eighty-year-old man. And at this gathering in 1984, I learned about Henson and Gunn being published by Bruchac, who had begun the ambitious enterprise of Greenfield Review Press, headquartered in an old gas station.

Kansas is a crossroads, and this gathering foreshadowed the rest of my time at Haskell. Many of the greats came through town and tarried, including Momaday, Joy



Harjo, Louise Erdrich, Heid E. Erdrich, Kimberly Blaeser, Ofelia Zepeda, Alice Walker, Linda Hogan, and many others.

After I met Bruchac, I ordered Greenfield Review Press books. It is hard to explain how important Joseph Bruchac's work as a publisher was, in range and depth. He had no institutional backing, just force of will, salesmanship, and belief in the importance of Native literatures. Especially useful in classes was *Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back: An Anthology of Poetry by American Indian Writers* (1983). It included work by over fifty poets, including Paula Gunn Allen, Robert Conley, Joy Harjo, Janet Cambell Hale, Geary Hobson, Gordon Henry, Diane Glancy, Lance Henson, Linda Hogan, Maurice Kenny, Adrian C. Louis, Momaday, Duane Niatum, William Oandasan, Simon Ortiz, Wendy Rose, Ralph Salisbury, Leslie Marmon Silko, Mary TallMountain, Luci Tapahonso, Laura Tohe, Gerald Vizenor, Welch, Elizabeth Woody, and Ray A. Young Bear. Few of these writers had books yet, except for chapbooks. This anthology became my text for creative writing classes, which I was allowed to teach as an overload (that made six sections a semester). I also borrowed from Hobson's indispensable anthology of prose and poetry *The Remembered Earth: An Anthropology of Contemporary Native American Literature* (1979).

Let me give a brief homage here to more of the publishers who forged places for the literature. *Blue Cloud Quarterly*, edited by Benet Tvedten in Marvin, South Dakota, published quarterly chapbooks by Native authors from 1971 to 1988. William Oandasan, Yuki, edited *A* magazine, founded in 1976, which included many Albuquerque-area writers. Maurice Kenny (Mohawk heritage) published Strawberry Hill Press, and Frank Parman's Point Riders Press in Oklahoma—publisher of Henson, Hobson, Kenny, and others—continues to publish Great Plains literature. John Crawford of West End Press, founded in 1975, published early books by Tapahonso, Louis, Bruchac, and others. Anna Lee Walters has headed the Navajo Community College

Press from the 1970s to present time. None of these presses has had wide distribution beyond libraries that collect Indigenous writings, the writers themselves, and their followers. All have kept alive the spark of Indigenous literature.

Students at Haskell are from about a hundred tribes in any given semester, and up to 1200 students total in the 1980s, so *Songs from This Earth* provided role models for just about everybody. I had a few creative writing students who had been at the Institute of American Indian Arts when it was a high school, and they helped the creative writing classes, including me, settle into writing circles. Mary Ann Gerard is one of these early students. Others were Jennie James, Bill James, and Diane Willie. What adventures we had in class and also field trips to see area visitors like Seamus Heaney and Linda Hogan. The program eventually developed an official Associate of Fine Arts degree. I appreciate the efforts of my colleagues who joined me in later years, including Trish Reeves, James Thomas Stevens (Akwesasne Mohawk), Amy Stuber, Christie Cooke (Diné), Laura Mann (Choctaw), and Joshua Falleaf (Delaware).

My Magical Winter of 1984 with Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

Before social media and even before cable television, winters in small Kansas towns could be endless. One dark evening I had cabin fever and went to the local bookstore to kill a few hours. I picked up *Love Medicine* by an Ojibwe writer, Louise Erdrich, and riffled through a few pages. Wow. I became disoriented, almost dizzy, from the song-like prose. Lyrical prose was a drastic shift in mainstream literary taste. Hemingway's journalistic brevity was the accepted standard of excellence. William Faulkner's exaggerated stream-of-consciousness was an aberrant Southern exception. My fiction writing professor at Wichita State chided me for cluttering my beginner's short stories with poetic flourishes, and he considered it further evidence that poets should not write fiction. But Erdrich changed all that. Amy Tan modeled her novel *Joy Luck Club* on Erdrich's style, and then this style for fiction writers became normalized (Feldman). This important contribution of Erdrich to mainstream literature is hardly acknowledged.



What magical experiences I had with Erdrich's novels. I read her poetry also, *Jacklight* (1984) and *Baptism of Desire* (1989), and these had similar themes as the novels, in shorter versions that were perfect for classroom use. Those students with Catholic backgrounds, some conflicted and sometimes less so, could relate to them especially. I remember the poem "Night Sky," which begins with Arcturus, "guardian of the bear" in Greek, who transforms into a present-time being in northern woods like those of Minnesota. The last section, IV, is a critical change in expectations for literary reading:

Simple
to tear free
stripped and shining
to ride through crossed firs (*Jacklight*)

The past-tense "myth" of encyclopedia definitions becomes a present-day motion in this last section of the poem. This invigoration of a traditional story from past to present is an important shift in cultural paradigms, especially in 1984. Her poem "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways" continues to be essential to understanding tribal experiences (*Jacklight*).

A few years later I was fortunate to be in a seminar at the Newberry Library in Chicago, where I picked up the Native alternative newspaper of the region. In it was a scathing review of *Love Medicine* that berated Erdrich for writing her English-language versions of tribal experience. This was my first acquaintance with identity politics, years before tribal nation enrollment could override all other identity considerations. It did not deter me from using her works in classes at Haskell, nor students from identifying with her writings. Erdrich is enrolled in a federally recognized nation, but it is noteworthy that many of the early writers were not.

Genre Fluidity

Erdrich moves among genres without being pigeon-holed as novelist or young adult author or poet. This was unusual in the 1980s. Publishers in mainstream houses looked for one-genre writers—James Michener (novel) or Calvin Trillin (essay) or E.E. Cummings (poetry). Momaday's early books included poetry, braided non-fiction, novel, memoir, and lyrical essays. Because of his Pulitzer he could set his own terms. Vizenor also shape-shifted among genres at will, as have many if not most Native writers. Silko's *Ceremony* was much anticipated before its 1977 publication with Viking Press in New York, in part because of the protests against uranium mining and nuclear power plants' environmental effects. The genre fluidity also was notable. Silko's use of traditional narratives and forms, including storytelling on paper, furthered Momaday's precedent. Her use of both verse and prose within the same work, woven together, added another hybrid dimension, still considered experimental. Bookstores favor wares that fit into shelf categories, so the commercial imperative impacts what gets published, as I learned myself later when publishing prose-poetry works.

A 1978 video documentary with Silko by Larry Evers, "Running on the Edge of the Rainbow," gave Silko a chance to add further dimensions of genre fluidity, with alternative versions of the same text shown in storytelling for children alongside written texts. Her stories are improvisational, with distinct tunings for each audience—a characteristic of orality, and she expresses this on the page as well. This video was a regular showing for my classes. It helped to humanize the pages of text they read. In the same series, Andrew Nantonabah's traditional Diné singing is an example of the Navajo walking song, a traditional genre. Alan Basso's studies regarding Chiricahua Apache orality added specifics for that tradition, including social contexts and connections to landmarks (1996). Availability of more genres of oral narratives expanded the classroom canon.

Joy Harjo writes poetry especially beloved by students, including all the stanzas of parallel lines in "She Had Some Horses" (1997). This helped them understand the practice of metaphor, as they imagined the stories woven into that extended



celebration of Native life and horses. Her use of prose poems accommodates storytelling orality. One of my favorites of her books, *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994), incorporates backstory, often presented in poetry readings, as a part of the text. This addendum on the same page, a personal footnote perhaps, is set off by a star wingding and italicized. She inscribed my copy, "Some songs and stories for your journey," which acknowledges the hybridity.

Harjo and Mary TallMountain were featured by Bill Moyers in his television series *Ancestral Voices* (1989), and this gave them a forum to explain and perform their works. Tall Mountain's early death curtailed her contributions, but she influenced many writers, especially on the West Coast. Her story of adoption as an orphaned child and her reconnection with her family in Alaska was important to Haskell students from similar family backgrounds.

These various expansions of oral tradition into literary writings continue in Native writings today. They also helped Haskell students navigate literature classes, writing assignments, and academic culture. Among my former students are numerous lawyers, Ph.Ds., master's degree holders, college administrators, Smithsonian staff, and writers. United States Representative Sharice Davids from Kansas attended Haskell.

Luci Tapahonso and Diné Language Forward

In the early 1990s, Robert Martin, Cherokee, became permanent president of Haskell, and as he innovated important reforms, his wife Luci Tapahonso, Diné, joined him from Albuquerque to be a professor at the University of Kansas. Her first full-length book, *A Breeze Swept Through* (1987) from West End Press, had been published, and soon she followed it with *Sáanii Dahataal/The Women Are Singing* (1993). I remember her patiently trying to teach me how to pronounce the title, the first Diné language I had attempted, even though I heard students speak it at Haskell. She was the first

Indigenous author published by a widely distributed press to title a book in a Native language. She was fluent in her language, also unusual for most of the early Indigenous authors.

Tapahonso transferred Diné into English syntax, a notable hallmark of her work "Hills Brothers Coffee." This signature poem has nine stanzas of irregular lengths to convey a narrative about the visit of a maternal uncle to his niece for a cup of coffee. Tapahonso is a genius at layering different time frames into a single poem—"one morning" for the visit; her mother's habitual "jumping in her car and speeding"; and the ending with the narrator's own future-progressive actions as she regularly drinks coffee, which is also past progressive as she has this memory. All these times suspend as one as the niece-poet replicates her Diné-speaking uncle's statement, "the store is where I'm going to." This inversion of the usual English subject-verb order is clearly understood by English language speakers and also clearly divergent. The entire poem is complicated by the convergence of many tenses, structures, and related storylines into one smoothly flowing account. It is a masterpiece.

As Tapahonso generously devoted her time to readings for Haskell students, I observed how she is one of the best readers of poetry. She does not have a highly dramatic style, yet she is spellbinding. She is able to engage large audiences, who follow her words and imagine her images in unison. Her stresses and intonations add layers of humor to innocuous words as in renditions of "Hills Brothers Coffee," where the "kick" of the coffee is what "does it" for her.

Tapahonso's attention to the Haskell community while successfully navigating academic politics at K.U. made her an effective representative of Diné people and all Natives in general. She educated K.U. colleagues about the different but not lesser structures of Indigenous-influenced literary works. She negotiated to get a graduate program in Indigenous Studies at the University of Kansas, which allowed many Haskell students to continue graduate studies. She rose in the academic ranks to professor. She even negotiated a good parking spot and basketball tickets. This non-Indigenous



university came to understand her worth and her literature before she moved back to the Southwest. She remains a Jayhawk basketball fan.

Dances with Moving Pictures

Dances with Wolves was an important film at Haskell. When I saw it with an audience of mostly Haskell students in 1990, I cringed at the white savior motif. Like Tarzan in Edgar Rice Burroughs books, John J. Dunbar quickly became the leader of Indigenous warriors. The heroine had to be a white captive, to complete the stereotype, the “Jane.” Yet students’ reactions surprised me as they talked in the darkened room. They were so happy to see any reasonable representation of Native people that they embraced it. Lakota language was present, and many relatives were extras. The next day, new cycles of jokes circulated. A colleague had a Pawnee cousin, whom he called to offer support after the Pawnee villain in the movie acted so heartlessly—kudos to Wes Studi, the actor. Even my colleague was surprised at his cousin’s positive response: “It’s about time the Pawnees get some respect,” he joked. It was a giant step forward after John Wayne movies.


The movie was a breakthrough film, reviving the Western genre, and this made possible Sherman Alexie’s later film *Smoke Signals* (1998). In those early days, movie industry people were also willing to support *Medicine River*, based on Thomas King’s novel (HBO, 1993), and Greg Sarris’ *Grand Avenue*, based on his book of the same title (HBO, 1996). The independent film *Powwow Highway* (1989) gained new recognition. A generation of Indigenous movie stars made places for themselves, including Haskell graduate Steve Reavis, who had an effective role in the film *Fargo*—I remembered him on the basketball team and as a gas station attendant working near Haskell. This was the era of VCR tapes. They made video in the classroom possible, so these films became regular fare. Haskell faculty member Joni Murphy, Creek, founded a film

festival that brought to campus Studi, Gary Farmer, Eileen Miles, and other standouts. Stephen Paul Judd, Thomas Yeahpah, Tvli Jacobs, and others took classes at Haskell and have continued with their own television and film projects.

Especially important to Haskell students was the work of Greg Sarris, who set his stories in Santa Rosa, California, an urban setting similar to that of Tommy Orange's Oakland of *There There* (2022). The Native population of the country was shifting to more urban areas, and so was the demographic at Haskell. Cultural and community identity transformed yet persisted in cities. In Sarris's film and stories, students could recognize living situations similar to theirs in Phoenix, Oklahoma City, Seattle, Oakland, Wichita, or other relocation sites.

When video interviews with elders became less difficult because of VCR technology, some considered this new technology to be a second era of orality. Powwow songs, talks, special events, tribal documentaries—all these became possible. Haskell alumni like Ken Cadue and Curtis Wright gave video interviews about their boarding school days, and these became some of the first records and critiques of those experiences. The daughter of Wilson (Buster) Charles, Nola, was on the Haskell staff and presented slides about her father's Olympic appearance and athletic career. Charles was a Haskell alum, so Nola explained the hardships he endured in the early 20th century at Haskell.

Bill Curtis taught video classes and documented the 1984 Haskell centennial program, boarding school history, sports, graduation speakers, and history of Native veterans. Rhonda LeValdo (Acoma Pueblo), his student, continued as faculty in the program. Video made possible long-distance education. Haskell had early distance learning before the Internet, with locations on the Prairie Band Potawatomi reservation and, briefly, Arizona. I taught online classes and developed American Indian Film, Traditional Narratives, and other courses in the 1990s, which made completion of degrees easier. Plus, Indigenous literary traditions adapt well to electronic media, because of the genre fluidity—interwoven impacts of visual, text, movement, and sound in traditional settings make moving image-audio media more apt than static media.





Ruptures and Reifications: Ending the 20th Century

Post-modernism arose by the end of the 20th century. Academics influenced by architecture and the Frankfurt School evolved a vocabulary to describe culture and especially literature. Wurth connects this movement with a third wave of Native literature. Some of the works by Native people already were intertextual, ruptured, juxtaposed with sometimes absurd contrasts, and more—although mainstream academics influenced by this European movement did not engage, for the most part, in Native literatures. The publication of an anthology of Native and Post-Modernism works, *Visit Teepee Town: Native Writings after the Detours*, edited by Glancy and Mark Nowak in 1999, was a landmark. It included text-art by Hachavi Edgar Heap-Of-Birds (Southern Cheyenne and briefly, a Haskell student), whose conceptual works disrupt expectations. Photographs and narratives of performance-artist James Luna's works appear in the collection. The authors further include Peter Blue Cloud, Besmilr Brigham, Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, Larry Evers and Felipe Molina, Louise Bernice Halfe. Juan Felipe Herrera, Hogan, Carolyn Lei-Ianilau, Maurice Kenny, Victoria Lena Manyarrows, Glancy, Lise McCloud, Wendy Rose, Sarris, Stevens, Barbara Tedlock, Vizenor, Rosemarie Waldrop, and Phil Young. This assigned book gave students great delight in variations of all kinds of language. They created their own genres in response, in creative writing classes and elsewhere. Their diverse works, not the academic reorganization of genres, made post modernism significant at Haskell.

Sherman Alexie's opus, for Haskell, fits into the last decade of the 20th century, beginning with poetry, *The Business of Fancy Dancing*, 1992. Also important was *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, 1993, short stories, and some were the basis of the film *Smoke Signals*. Alexie introduced popular culture figures (a huge

innovation at the time), radio music, and media (the Weather Channel in the opening pages of *The Lone Ranger*). He had ties to his reservations and also urban experiences, which he brought to his writings. He used sectional structures and other borrowings from mainstream poets. For students, this was a welcome contrast to the British literary canon.

An Astonishing Aftermath

My time at Haskell ended in 2010. Since then, the expansion of literary accomplishments by Native writers is astonishing. Returning the Gift gatherings through the years have been important for keeping connections, as well as Wordcraft Circle activities and awards. I hosted one of their gatherings at Haskell, about 2001. Kimberly Blaeser, a fine Ojibwe poet, founded Indigenous Nations Poets (In-Na-Po), in 2020 and invited me to be part of the board. This allows me to see the continuing excellence of emerging writers plus development of the language back movement, hybridity, gender fluidity, complexities of emerging tribal identities, and more. Many fine writers are graduating from the Institute of American Indian Arts undergraduate and Master of Fine Arts programs. I cannot name all the authors, filmmakers, and artists, and their contribution in this space. Robert Martin, Cherokee Nation, was the president of IAIA 2007-2025. His administration at IAIA and leadership at Haskell for ten years have had an enormous impact on the possibilities of Indigenous literatures. He supported the arts and educational standards at both institutions and held space for the development of programs and infrastructure. I am forever grateful to him for his expertise.

My former student Carrie Cornelius, Potawatomi and Oneida, is now director of the Haskell library. She collects recent titles, often after attending Native writer gatherings, and she hosts visiting Indigenous writers. As a board member of In-Na-Po, she helps support fellowships and programs that further the progress of emerging writers. The library is a center for students to engage with great writers of the distant



and recent past as well as the present. It is a place where they can become inspired to add their own voices.

On my last day at Haskell, after donating boxes of books and papers to Sequoyah National Research Center and the Spencer Library Special Collections and Archives, I sat in my backyard several weeks and looked at the pine trees, the squirrels, the angles of sun across the grass, the mourning doves. Then I went back to my writing desk. A great pleasure is watching how this story ends, turns, and continues. Since Momaday's Pulitzer in 1969, Native writers have taken their places in tribal communities and the national literary forum as well. In 1984 when I started my tenure at Haskell, this proliferation was inconceivable. So many have contributed to a much better positioning of Native writers and their cultural expressions, including literary works. This story will continue into the future.

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INTERVIEW

WAITING FOR CRAZY HORSE: Recorded Interview and Discussion with Vine Deloria, Jr.

GERALD VIZENOR

Vine Deloria Jr. invited me to record an interview with him at his suburban home in Denver, Colorado. The comments that early autumn more than fifty years ago were direct and heartfelt about native resistance, education, ideology, reservation politics, schemes and federal agencies, and always with humor. The interview and discussions were casual, more conversational than journalistic, and lasted for about an hour in the dim light of his basement office with the scent of laundry soap.

Barbara Nystrom Deloria directed me to the basement, an ordinary scene of sidesteps through the bed sheets hanging on a line to dry, and found Vine at a steel tanker desk under a small window. The author leaned back in a heavy chair, smiled, and with a sense of visionary motion teased me for having aroused the wrath of Dennis Banks, Clyde Bellecourt, and others in the American Indian Movement.

I was a staff writer for the *Minneapolis Tribune* at the time and reported the obvious in an editorial article that two words, *Chippewa Indian*, were common misconceptions. An anxious troupe of natives convened at the entrance to the Minneapolis Star Tribune and protested my commentary about invented *indians*, and then vanished that afternoon when they apparently learned from elders that the Anishinaabe and Ojibwe had been wrongly named the Chippewa. American Indian nominations were relevant at the time, but now the word *indian* and many other invented cultural names are more fully explained in standard dictionaries. Even so the fabrications of natives as romantic silhouettes of victimry continue in the literature of popular culture as a vain compassion.

The first discussion that afternoon in the basement was about his book, *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, published a few months earlier in 1969. Vine declared that "we really need the younger generation to come in and take over the whole structure of Indian Affairs."

Vine was thirty-six years old at the time of the interview, and in the next five years he inspired thousands of young natives to engage in politics and governance, participate in national organizations, and study treaty law and literature, and at the same time he graduated from the University of Colorado Law School, taught at Western Washington State University, advocated for native fishing rights, and published five more books, *We Talk, You Listen*; *Of Utmost Good Faith*; *God is Red*; *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties*; and *The Indian Affair*.

Vine served as executive director of the National Congress of American Indians from 1963 to 1967 and praised the younger generation of natives. His generous notice of other natives and organizations was characteristic of his liberal sense of public service, native ethos, loyalty, and his dedication to education. He wrote in *Custer Died for Your Sins*, "Ideological leverage is always superior to violence," and native problems "have always been ideological rather than social, political or economic."



Native humor and irony are other admirable attributes of his literary manner as a visionary storer and in conversations and publications. "The current joke is that a survey was taken and only fifteen percent of the Indians thought that the United States should get out of Vietnam. Eighty-five percent thought they should get out of America," he wrote in *Custer Died for Your Sins*. Vine declared that "irony and satire provide much keener insights into a group's collective psyche and values than do years of research," and concluded that "until we can once again produce people like Crazy Horse all the money and help in the world will not help us."

Vine conveyed native irony and humor on every occasion, in conversations, at conventions, and lectures, and he practiced the communal tease and mockery of poses, once customary in many native communities, mainly with native political leaders, lawyers, and academics. He was invited to address a convention of historians, for instance, and with a perfect ironic gesture told the august scholars that his great aunt was a "white princess."

Natives easily "come together by sharing humor of the past," he wrote, and the most common ironic stories in the past fifty years alluded to cultural anthropologists, federal agents, separatist treaties, General George Armstrong Custer, and the navigational miscalculations of Christopher Columbus.

Vine encouraged native movements that were progressive, clever, and embraced an ethos of governance with recognition, and celebrated the rights of resistance in the ruins of civilization. He declared that it was crucial that natives "pick the intellectual arena as the one in which to wage war. Past events have shown that the Indian people have always been fooled by the intentions of the white man. Always we have discussed irrelevant issues while he has taken our land. Never have we taken the time to examine the premises upon which he operates so that we could manipulate him as he has us."

The New Indians by Stan Steiner was published in 1968, and the concept of *new* natives insinuated the absence of *old* natives and portrayed hundreds of young natives who were active and ready to march, protest, occupy, outmaneuver, overturn, and "overrun" political and racial obstacles with a new sense of presence, natural motion, and resistance.

Steiner told Studs Terkel in a 1967 radio broadcast that Vine Deloria "attended a civil rights banquet in New York and passed out stickers" that natives would not "overcome" but "We shall overrun," and eight years later in a broadcast interview Vine told Terkel the legal status of the tribes had not been established in court, and "so we have a much more difficult time because we have to evolve the theory of where we want to go at the same time that we're doing activist things to attract attention to get people to understand."

Vine read about my advocacy for natives near Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis, otherwise the urban reservation, or existential colony, and my protests and petitions that the Bureau of Indian Affairs change the legal definition of service as "on or near a federal reservation" to include the urban reservation, the largest native community in Minnesota. Representative Donald Fraser investigated the service obstacle and reported that there was no congressional intent to limit federal services to reservations. And, of course, Vine had read my polemical report about Thomas James White Hawk who had been sentenced to capital punishment in South Dakota.

Vine telephoned Arthur Naftalin, Mayor of Minneapolis, and boldly directed him to sponsor my travel to a conference of reservation leaders at the Alvarado Hotel in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Vine was aware of the article in the *Minneapolis Tribune*, 29 September 1966, that Mayor Naftalin had appointed me chairman of the Indian American Task Force, and decided it was time that we met. That was my first native convention and three years later we met again at the same hotel for the convention of the National Congress of American Indians, October 8, 1969. Vine introduced me to many native leaders at the convention, including President Wendell Chino of the



Mescalero Apache who had created the catchy concept of “red capitalism,” and Cato Valandra of the Rosebud Sioux.

“The 26th Annual Convention of the National Congress of American Indians is an event of great meaning and vital importance for all our citizens,” President Richard Nixon wrote in a formal letter to the convention. “It pleases me to know that Vice President Agnew, Secretary Hickel and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Louis Bruce, will be with you to discuss the challenges we face and the action we must take to meet them.”

“This Administration *opposes* termination,” Vice President Spiro Agnew asserted at the conference. “This Administration *favors* the continuation of the trust relationship and the protection of Indian lands and Indian resources. Let us now and forever put to rest all fears and begin positive action together.”

Vine recounted in the interview that younger natives need to participate “in the organizations, do a lot of the hard field work. And it seems there is so much emphasis today on demonstration and spectacular activism.”

The *new* natives, the younger progressive native activists, would have been at the right convention to engage the *old* and established native leaders, and to directly petition the prominent officials of the federal government, including the Secretary of the Interior Walter Hickel and Louis Bruce, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, but many young radical natives were on their way to the Occupation of Alcatraz a month later in November 1969.

Radical occupations became new strategies of native resistance, and three years later the American Indian Movement occupied the Bureau of Indian Affairs at the Department of Interior in Washington, and the following year occupied by force and roadblocks Wounded Knee, South Dakota, on 27 February 1973.

Vine was spirited, calm, casual, and earnest in most of the discussions in the basement that autumn, but he was critical and resolute about missions and missionaries on reservations, the Indian Resources Development Act, or Omnibus Bill of 1967, and the American Indian Chicago Conference. The Omnibus Bill "was very favorable," he maintained, but was ruined six years earlier by the American Indian Chicago Conference in 1961. Vine declared that the "Chicago conference just split the whole thing wide open so that a lot of the ideology," and the older native unity, "went down the drain, and it just became personalities." The native community were "fragmented" and "failed to take advantage of the favorable government claims." He suggested that natives were more cohesive about seven year later in 1968 when President Lydon Johnson established the National Council of Indian Opportunity.

The Omnibus Bill created a "loan fund for economic development activities within Indian Country," Christopher Riggs wrote in "American Indians, Economic Development, and Self-Determination in the 1960s." The measure "would have allowed the Interior Department and Native groups greater power to manage Indian property. With permission from the Secretary of the Interior, tribes could form corporations to facilitate economic development, sell or mortgage tribal lands, condemn land within reservations, and adopt zoning and building codes." This "Great Society legislative initiative provoked strong Indian opposition, and it never became law."

Riggs explained in his essay that those who supported the measure were opposed by natives who "desired economic development but maintained that the Omnibus Bill endangered tribal self-determination by threatening tribal lands and giving the Interior Secretary too many new powers. Moreover, critics argued that the Interior Department had drafted the bill without incorporating suggestions from tribal leaders."

Vine teased anthropology, and his mockery of an academic obsession with natives became a signature style. His portrayal and censure of churchy missions and



missionaries was similar, unreserved reproach and ridicule, but he seldom named actual individuals in recounts of the deception and treachery on federal reservations.

The American Indian Chicago Conference was initiated by two anthropologists, Sol Tax and Nancy Lurie and with the assistance of Robert Rietz, director of the American Indian Center in Chicago, and encouraged by D'Arcy McNickle, chairman of the Steering Committee. The conference was sponsored by several generous grants from foundations.

Close to five hundred natives from ninety communities gathered for a week in June 1961 to consider the simulations of dominance and separatism, legislative regulations, economic development, and the political sway of federal agencies, health, welfare, housing, education, and other crucial matters that proposed to protect natives for more than a century. The conference produced yet another idealistic and ironic parchment resolution of inequities, a "Declaration of Indian Purpose."

The parchment creed provided a preamble of the inherent rights with constitutional royal pronouns in the first paragraph. "We believe in the inherent right of all people to retain spiritual and cultural values, and that the free exercise of these values is necessary to the normal development of any people. Indians exercised this inherent right to live their own lives for thousands of years before the white man came and took their lands..."

Vine considered that his criticism of missionaries and churchy land grabs would result in at least one ironic outcome, and that actually happened when the land grabs were resolved partially on the Leech Lake Reservation in Minnesota more than a decade after his death on November 13, 2005. "I think the mission field is the greatest single source of racism against Indians that exists in the country," Vine declared in the interview. "And these missionaries have been out in Indian country for hundreds of years."

Vine considered my comment that Clyde Bellecourt and Dennis Banks of the American Indian Movement had demanded reparations from the Episcopal Church, and then he countered with marvelous mockery, "Well, I really hope there won't be any Indian Christians left. I think, you know, I really hope that everybody goes traditional."

Vine continued the discussion, "Now, I know Dennis and Clyde, and I don't, you know, agree that the churches owe us money. I don't agree using their form and format to get it." He pointed out that the church talked natives into signing treaties because natives could not read the fine print. "All of a sudden some church ends up with half a million dollars of land." He contended that "not only should we get money for the land they've taken," but "they should buy back the particular pieces of land that they got out of the treaties and deed it to the tribe."

The Leech Lake Reservation won the right in federal court to hunt and fish on treaty land about fifty years ago, but the urban militants of the American Indian Movement declared war on white fishers on treaty land.

The Episcopal Church provided accommodations for the militants at a resort on the Leech Lake Reservation shoreline of Cass Lake, Minnesota. The Episcopal dioceses had obtained the treaty land for mission duties and native conversions, and later turned the land into a summer resort for churchy city families, and then indirectly supported the armed protest of the American Indian Movement. The Cass Lake Episcopal Camp and other property on federal treaty land was returned six years later to the government of the Leech Lake Reservation.

Vine Deloria Jr. was a singular native philosopher and master of native irony and he changed forever the way natives are considered at universities, in state and federal courts, at protests, and in popular culture. His creative liberal conscience of service encouraged critical, political, and ideological encounters with individuals and institutions about the rights of natives, and his ethos of governance is memorable and continues to inspire natives around the world. He inadvertently described his own ironic prominence as a native advocate when he declared that "irony and satire provide



much keener insights into a group's collective psyche and values than do years of research," and concluded that "until we can once again produce people like Crazy Horse all the money and help in the world will not help us."

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GERALD VIZENOR AND VINE DELORIA

Edited Transcript of a Taped Interview

Denver Colorado, Autumn 1969

GERALD VIZENOR: Vine, your book has been in print four months now. And one of the reasons you state for writing the book is to involve more Indians, more young people, tribal organizations, and tribal governments. How successful has that been?

VINE DELORIA: I don't know how successful it's been, Gerald. But one of the things that I see is we really need the younger generation to come in and take over the whole structure of Indian Affairs. Work in the organizations, do a lot of the hard field work. And it seems there is so much emphasis today on demonstration and spectacular activism. I'm sympathetic to the new left ideas, but a lot of the techniques they use, to give an example, were at the convention of the National Congress of American Indians.

VIZENOR: Which one, the last one?

DELORIA: The last one in Albuquerque in October. There were eighteen hundred Indians there. And it was really the largest gathering you'd ever seen, twice as big as any previous convention.

VIZENOR: Were there more young people there?

DELORIA: Yeah, there were. Well, you remember the one in 1966, but what would you say, twenty to thirty kids there? This year, they're close to three hundred visitors. Mostly college students, a few high school students, and a lot of kids who've gone through the relocation program are just starting here in the Albuquerque area. I'd say there were easily three hundred kids there. And seven carloads from Berkeley came, and their whole emphasis was to march around with signs outside the hotel, calling them hicks and old racists.

VIZENOR: Calling them honkies?

DELORIA: They called them hicks and honkies. Throughout the convention they kept appealing to some of the NCIA officers to let youth have a say and they wanted a youth panel, the whole thing. And I just think the situation is too critical in Indian Affairs for us to have a substantial number of people playing this youth game for so long. I talked with some of the younger guys who are supposed to be in National Indian Youth Council and others, and I urged them to organize a youth party and run a candidate for president. And they could have racked up two to three hundred votes there. And by doing that, they would have, I think, really reoriented all the old tribal leaders. The guys who have traditionally made policy in National Congress of American Indians. It was a very tough election to begin with. Three major candidates and seventy some resolutions, so they're really fighting over policy for the whole Indian community. And if the youth had come in and put two or three guys on resolutions and offered to write resolutions. I think they could have really reoriented the whole posture of Indians nationally.

VIZENOR: You find that Indian young people sense, object, and involve themselves with the same criticisms of authority that young people across the country are doing. I mean, is it closer to a generation gap? Are young Indian people critical of the traditional means of power within tribal governments? Are they, are they more



ideological and true believers and responding to a white student rebellion? Or are they? Is there a distinction in their criticism?

DELORIA: Well, I think these students are hitting at a deeper level than the corresponding white students are in their attacks on white society. I was out in Bellingham, Washington, last May, and a lot of these kids are asking very incisive questions that you don't get unless they're two or three guys are really thinking in these terms nationally. We're in the older age group and more accepted as national leaders. But a lot of the kids I talked to are really asking very deep questions, the whole purpose of reservations. What we should be doing? What development is? And so many of the older tribal leaders are caught in this trap. They want to get something for the reservation people, and so they're very eager to accept the first thing that comes along. And these kids were really asking questions about stepping back from the whole situation, taking a look at it. Do we really want a shopping center on our reservation because it's going to bring in traffic and it's going to bring in pollution, it's going to bring in all kinds of things? So I think they're really looking at things in a much deeper level. But no matter how concerned you are or how sincere, you still can't throw the entire structure away, and particularly with our legal status here. Yeah, the tribes are federal corporations, and you may not like the tribal council, but if you abolish the legal statute, status is a federal corporation. Then you're really in trouble, because what is your status in relationship to your county and state? And I think a lot of them are so eager to be activists, that they don't—I mean, they look at the basic political structure as something you take by storm. And I think after you have been in it a while you see it as a whole series of blocks. If you put the right leverage on it, the whole thing revolves for you with a minimum of effort.

VIZENOR: Well, there's that kind of confrontation and politics.

DELORIA: It's somewhat of a crisis type thing.

VIZENOR: But less, less oriented to issues and more toward identity, and...

DELORIA: I think they're just probing the weak spots. Trying to find a weak spot that is an issue without trying to look at the whole setup. Now that, and down in New Mexico I've seen a report that a tremendous thing, this thing they are having at Gallup trying to get the Gallup ceremonial committee, to, you know, be more realistic about what their own relations are. Because as you know Gallup makes a big fuss over Indians one week a year when the Chamber of Commerce has thrown this talent on them, and then the police are beating the hell out of them the other fifty-one weeks of the year, and that's really a bad situation. I've complained about that for years. I'm glad to see younger guys coming in, you know, in a very organized way and really raising this issue.

VIZENOR: In your book, *Vine*, you offer some advice to young Indian people not to follow the path of the Black militant leaders, that Indians have more identity connected with reservation land status, and that freedom in that sense doesn't mean the same thing for Indian people that, that is, in contrast to what Black people are demanding. How do you respond then to the kind of militancy that some Indians are showing, and many Indian groups are identifying more closely with Black organizations? Particularly in urban centers?

DELORIA: Yeah, what I think is the urban situation is a different kettle of fish since there is at least the organizational split between urban and reservation at the present time. This is probably one route that the urban Indians have to travel until we can get the two put back together in one organization.

VIZENOR: Why is it so, because in urban centers there's no reservation status, so Indian organizations would have to demand programs from the federal government in the same kind of militant attitude as Black people do, is that it?



DELORIA: No. Well, I think the split at the present time comes because we've had short-sighted leadership in the last two years.

VIZENOR: Reservation leadership?

DELORIA: Reservation leaders who have not even examined what urban Indians can do to help.

VIZENOR: How do you contrast the rest, present reservation leadership and urban leadership, urban Indian organizations?

DELORIA: I think we get—well, I think there's really good leadership in both areas. But there are so many government programs available, or that are ostensibly available and you have to chase them for six weeks, and then you find that you can't qualify anyway, which they should have told you to begin with. But I think the thing that's hanging everything up is reservation leadership is oriented solely to the reservation, and they don't really see what the urban Indians are doing and what they're up to, and just a relief for them, for the reservation leaders to have some of the better guys go into the city. I think the same way a lot of city Indians and leadership there feels alienated from the tribe, because they have the leadership potential and yet they lost out on the reservation. Now I think the whole thing can be put together if both of them will support some kind of a community development corporation status.

VIZENOR: Do you see more involvement now between urban and reservation organizations? Are there closer relationships between leaders? Or has there ever been a serious problem?

DELORIA: [whistling] There hadn't been until the last two years when NCIA sponsored the first urban consultation. We got twenty-six Indian centers to Seattle, and at that point, some of the reservation leaders said, "Well, we don't want urban Indians in NCIA

because they're always talking about termination." Well, this was only true with regard to one tribe, but the net result of that consultation was that most reservation Indians went away thinking urban Indians were out to do them in, and urban Indians went away feeling rejected, and that feeling's been going through things for two years. So, you had some very bad feelings on both sides that shouldn't have been there. Been handled right I think eventually Alcatraz is something that may bring the whole group together.

VIZENOR: Both urban and reservation?

DELORIA: Both urban and reservation Indians.

VIZENOR: Why is that?

DELORIA: Well, you get urban Indians really trying to get a piece of land of their own, which is comparable to a reservation in an urban setting, to have a National Cultural Center. And this center would serve Indians all over the country, and they would have to, in order to get any sustained federal support. We would have to bring the reservation Indians into the urban setting and really make them face what the urban Indian faces. And I think there'd be a lot more understanding between the two groups, and a whole new program can be worked out.

VIZENOR: In the first sentence of *Custer Died for Your Sins* you write that Indians are like the weather, and as the weather, therefore, nothing can be either understood or predicted. Why [laughter] did you begin your book with that statement? Is that tongue in cheek?

DELORIA: I don't know. I don't when I see you know. One of the problems I've noticed over the last few years is so much was vested interest by outside people in what's going on in Indian affairs. If you have a meeting, and Indians get up, and they say, "well, all tribes are different, and we've got to figure out some kind of strategy so each tribe can be itself and still have a national policy." At that point, a lot of non-Indians say, "yes, but



you have so much in common that you ought to make a pan-Indianism common,"and you've been through this round. And then you go to a different conference, you say, "Well, you know, we're all Indians, we all share the same legal status. We all ought to have a general plan, a strategy for political action." All that consists of is voter education, and you can do that regardless of what tribe it is. At that point, interested non-Indians come in and say, "yes, but all tribes are different, and there's a difference between Flatheads and the Apaches, but they both mark their ballots the same way, and they both pull the lever the same way." And there's so much confusion, I just wanted to set that down. I knew that anybody who tried to write a book on Indians, if he said anything, he was going to be attacked, either, because he was too specific, and you have to generalize or because...

VIZENOR: Yes.

DELORIA: You know, you start out with generalizations, and all tribes are really different.

VIZENOR: Why then did you call the subtitle of the book, "An Indian Manifesto?"

DELORIA: Well, "manifesto" is a tough enough word to announce to the public. There's something going on, but it's not. It's short of a declaration of war (laughter). So, you don't get the whole country up in arms. You know, you don't have the police coming in to shooting you like the Panthers. So, it's a word in between, but it still has a cutting edge.

VIZENOR: How, or what's been the feeling of leaders towards the statement that you've made that the average life expectancy of an Indian leader is two and a half years?

DELORIA: Well, down in Albuquerque, a lot of guys who are trying to throw the incumbents out, agreed with that, and they used that as an ideological basis.

VIZENOR: I think you were kind of generous.

DELORIA: Yeah. You have to have such an Indian constituency to stay anywhere near the top. And that there's such a leveling process that goes on in Indian Affairs. If you're not always coming up with something new. If you're not right a hundred percent of the time, then they'll dump you right away.

VIZENOR: You can generalize how a man from a reservation in his mid-thirties would become a leader and what happens to him. Why he only lasts a couple of years.

DELORIA: Well, let's take... and some of them don't last that long. Let's take the case of Ronnie Lupe, the White Mountain Apache chairman. Now he started out on the council. He went to college for two years, a Korean veteran, came back and was on the council two years, and the younger people in Arizona wanted to put the older guys in a political trap so that they would set themselves up to move on up into the council. So in 1965 a lot of the younger Arizona people got behind Lester Oliver, who was chairman of the White Mountain Apache, and they ran him as the Southwest candidate for president of National Council of American Indians in 1965, and Oliver got beat. Not really very badly. He lost, but he came in third in a three-way race, about twelve votes under the second man, but it was enough of a defeat to place him in jeopardy as chairman of the White Mountain Apache.

VIZENOR: Oh, I see.

DELORIA: So, in early 1965, early 1966, younger Apaches got together on the basis of the fact that Lester had lost the national race they pushed Lester out and put Ronnie Lupe in. And then for two years, from 1966 to 1969, Ronnie built his national political machine, but it turned out he was going against the trend nationally.

VIZENOR: What was the trend?

DELORIA: The trend, we had a tremendously strong coalition of everybody but the Northwest from 1965 to 1967, but then that side won too much and the tribes from



little states, California, Nevada, Wisconsin, Michigan began to shift over to support the Northwest position against the Plains Arizona combination. So all the time, Ronnie was building up for a race at the National Congress of American Indian presidency. The coalition that he was working with was melting away, and in Portland 1967 we won by forty-four votes out of something like sixteen hundred. And down to Albuquerque by 1969 the coalition had practically vanished. Ronnie tried to run anyway, and he got beat by a hundred and fifty-six votes out of about seventeen hundred, but that was really a resounding defeat in national Indian politics, and the people who beat him were the people who lost in 1967 in Portland.

VIZENOR: What were some of the issues that the group raised, which you might say lead to his defeat?

DELORIA: I think in every national convention or national meeting that you have in Indian country, one or two leading issues come out. These are issues that Indian people feel fairly certain there's a consensus on. They want to make this the sore point with interior, health, education, welfare, or, remember a few years ago, everybody's talking about the Omnibus Bill.

VIZENOR: Yes.

DELORIA: And the thing was already dead; had been dead for six months.

VIZENOR: Well, it was written before it had ever been brought to the attention of Indians.

DELORIA: One was making Alaska the issue, but they continue to talk about that all through 1968, even though there was no conceivable chance the bill would pass. And this is really kind of an offensive maneuver to keep the government agencies and the bureaucrats off guard. Then you get them spending so much time apologizing for

something they've done, that you're really not worried about anymore, but it distracts them. So, this year, two of the issues were, what are we going to do on Alaska land claims and the Pyramid Lake water fight. And the older, the coalition that had been in the Arizona Plains Coalition, simply didn't raise enough crucial issues that would attract smaller tribes and the Northwest had almost pushed through all the hunting and fishing resolutions. Now this attracted a lot of California, Nevada, Wisconsin, some of the southeastern tribes.

VIZENOR: Well, there was a lot of press on that too.

DELORIA: Yeah...

VIZENOR: In other words, it was easy to rally support for that kind of issue. Well, in a way, what you are saying is that national Indian leadership and organization in a sense corresponds to the kind of issues that states and regions on a national non-Indian level organize, or certain coalitions and federal elections correspond to issues in the Southwest or the Southeast or the urban complexes.

DELORIA: Yeah, in a way they do. I think Indians have one thing that you don't see in the other politics. Now the democrats will get in and the second time around they'll promote the message "you never had it so good." And a lot of times, they're getting three, four or five times running on 'you never had it so good.' And you can't do that anyway.

VIZENOR: Why?

DELORIA: Because they don't care whether they had it so good. They're interested in what's going on right now. Now, the group that's been in, and each year came up with a different issue. Now this last year, the executive director didn't know what issues to raise, and he was at odds with his political supporters. So, nobody wanted to raise any issues for fear it might put him back in. And so, if you're in any kind of leadership position, you're in the deadly trap of having to raise new issues to keep and attract even



the majority of people to the organization. But if these issues get crosswise with the people who have been supporting you and are, are really behind this philosophy, then you can quickly get dumped. Helen Peterson [Native American activist from the Pine Ridge Reservation] in the 1950s is the only one who's been able to last more than three years in a national post [Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians 1953 to 1959]. And this was the 1950s dominated by termination, anti-termination thinking.

VIZENOR: What would you say the 1960s was dominated by at the end of the decade statement?

DELORIA: The 1960s with just an incredible series of foul-ups in national Indian politics.

VIZENOR: The Omnibus Bill [Indian Resources Development Bill] arguments came around 1965, right, first time?

DELORIA: No, that was done by May of 1966, the Omnibus Bill was really a hot issue, but there were no central issues because they were very favorable. The Democratic administration was very favorable, and what really ruined the 1960s was the Chicago conference of 1961, where these anthropologists got forty to fifty thousand dollars and had nine-hundred Indians in Chicago to talk for ten days about Indian politics. And what this really did was break up all the old, we practically had a two-party system through the 1950s, in Indian eyes, and the Chicago conference, just split the whole thing wide open so that a lot of the ideology of Indian Affairs went down, went down the drain, and it just became personalities until, I'd say, the very late 1960s. So, what you really had was a badly fragmented Indian community that failed to take advantage of the favorable government claims, and it wasn't I don't suppose until 1967 to 1968 that the thing was pulled together in any cohesive strength. And by that time, the only

thing we could get was in the spring of 1968, [President Lyndon Johnson established the National Council of Indian Opportunity]

VIZENOR: I would say Humphrey, [Vice President Hubert Humphrey was named chairman of the National Council on Indian Opportunity].

DELORIA: Humphrey, but that was 1967. I mean, you know, it was really a waste of seven years, while the whole new political coalition formed.

VIZENOR: How would you prescribe the best way for Indian leaders to organize to bring them the greatest benefits of federal programs and federal commitment, and resolution to some reservation problems, primarily, most of the legal activism? How would you prescribe, ideally, the best way to approach Indian politics in any organization?

DELORIA: Well, I think ideally, it's on a state level. Although you know, in any way support state jurisdiction or state services. But I think that you got to have voting strength, so that you can get into the national election. And so that whatever leadership comes from your state, they can deliver something, if it's only going to the local caucuses, and they're electing twenty or thirty Indians to go to the county convention. And, you know, just so they're visible in the political process. So, what we talked about in 1967, and then the last two years, this has been shoved to the side, was reorganizing the National Congress of American Indians on a statewide basis. And every organized reservation in every city Indian center, would have a seat on the statewide board.

VIZENOR: Oh, yes.

DELORIA: And then you build statewide offices with a lobbyist at the state level. So, you're protecting the state legislature, and then have a rotating chairmanship. So that there's, so that all of your Indian politics occurs on the national level, but you have very,



very strong state organizations where there's, where you don't get into political scrambles.

VIZENOR: So, each state in time would have representation.

DELORIA: Right.

VIZENOR: Some representation on the national level.

DELORIA: Right.

VIZENOR: Yes, and leadership.

DELORIA: In this way, say, up in Minnesota, and the Minnesota Indians, both urban and reservation, would pick two guys to go in and negotiate statewide funding to an Indian organization not to the intertribal Council, not to the State Department of Indian education or anything like that. And the senators and congressmen that they are dealing with would realize that these guys represent all Indians in urban and reservation areas, and that they really represent a substantial chunk of voters and this way, you get direct pressure on the system where it affects you.

VIZENOR: One of the impressive arguments from your book is, of course, for Indians to govern their own affairs. And one of the ways they can probably best do that related to a point you make about anthropologists, that anthropologists should contribute something to the community, in a sense, I guess you're saying that all white people who involve themselves with Indians in some way, many of them become experts, to the white community, they become the interpreters of problems in Indian life. Would you comment on this role of the anthropologist which has probably been the most damaging from an Indian point of view, because almost all anthropologists have been white, and they've been responsible for interpreting Indians to white people, and

therefore white people have had a rare opportunity to hear Indians talk about what they think. You're an exception in your book, and there aren't very many books like yours. So, would you comment?

DELORIA: Yeah, well, I ran into... my book was reviewed in *Saturday Review of Literature* by an anthropologist. I don't know where she got her ideas, but she interpreted the whole thing as something that she and another anthropologist had started in 1960.

VIZENOR: She, she claimed credit for something that...

DELORIA: Well, she said that we really started the whole thing, and he doesn't realize it.

VIZENOR: Oh, I see.

DELORIA: And all this stuff that's coming out in his book, is stuff that we've already talked about in 1960, you know, which I really didn't realize that they had anything to do with Indians. You know, because I've been on the inside of the Indian circuit. And, you know, the whole issue of southeastern tribes in their federal relations, you know, I don't care how many anthropologists talked about it, you know, to themselves or to other people. The issue came up in the National Congress of American Indians when we were trying to find a gimmick to fight the termination problem. We decided the best way to keep us from being terminated was to go out and create more tribes. So that we're gaining a tribe every time.

VIZENOR: Everyone terminates one, creates one...

DELORIA: Yeah, and so we're keeping the balance that we have. But anyway, this anthropologist Nancy Lurie, presented a paper this summer, saying that Indians drink to gain their identity, and from an outside anthropological viewpoint, this really looks like it's a sophisticated science, and it explains a lot of Indian behavior. But you know as well as I do, you go into a bar, where there's a lot of Indians, you sit down, and you



ask one of them his name, he'll tell you his name, and you tell him your name. And then the second question on both sides is always what tribe are you? So, your first two questions before you even talked about drinking or anything else, just establishing identity and relationships and the whole thing. And so, you meet an Indian, and he says, he's from Fort Hall, and then immediately brings up all your knowledge of Fort Hall, and you tell him you are a Sioux, and then talk about the relations and you're immediately in a relationship that both tribes have had with each other for hundreds of years. And so. the anthropologists are really perverting the whole Indian process, if they don't see what's going on. And the next guy in the door is an anthropologist, he sees all these Indians drinking, talking with each other, and he says, well, they have to do this to have an identity. They don't.

VIZENOR: One of the proposals you make, which I think is a fine one, is that anthropologists who obtain money to conduct research on reservations or particular subject areas, in urban centers or reservations, you propose that anthropologists should obtain equal money to pay to the tribe that they're studying. So, for example, should they propose they receive ten-thousand dollars to conduct a study of some tribal process on some reservation, they should obtain an equal amount of money to pay to the tribe so that they are contributing an element in tribal life. Are you going to carry that argument farther?

DELORIA: Well, if I get any more static from anthropologists, I'm really pushing it at some of these national meetings, because...

VIZENOR: Instead of a strong feeling among Indian leaders?

DELORIA: I think it's building up very rapidly. Now, what the tribes are seeing is that they try and get a government grant. And maybe they apply for thirty or forty thousand

dollars for a Headstart program. They can't get it, maybe they can only get seventeen hundred dollars. Well, then suddenly, out comes an anthropologist who's making twenty-five to thirty thousand as a full PhD anyway, and this character is getting six-hundred dollars a week to run around and ask them questions about their identity, or you know, are you all left-handed or some crazy thing like that. And I think you're really getting under a lot of people's skin. So, one of my proposals is that, and I think a lot of other Indians are going to start pushing, is that a financed project is going to come out to the reservation to do a study, then they bring a contribution, a matching grant, if they're gonna spend fifty thousand dollars, then they have to bring fifty thousand, because otherwise, Indians are just ending up with some kind of a tamed zoo for a bunch of people who are making a hell of a good living off.

VIZENOR: Where you say in your book, "laid low by an anthro."

DELORIA: Yeah. Where do you go?

VIZENOR: Where do you go? To a library (laughter). In your book, you're equally as critical of the role of missionaries on reservations and among Indians. What proposal would you offer to improve the relationship between missionaries and Indian people?

DELORIA: Well, I think the mission field is the greatest single source of racism against Indians that exists in the country. That even in the Bureau of Indian Affairs you don't find real arrogant paternalism with relation to Indian people that you do in the mission field. And these missionaries have been out in Indian country for hundreds of years. They still don't have any native clergy trained. It's still kind of some smart, young white men coming out to bare the White Man's Burden among the savages. And they're talking, still talking about converting people to the Jesus road, and some of these Indian families have been Christian for five and six generations, and so the whole thing is just utmost absurdity. And each of the major churches is involved in the Indian field. They're spending in excess of a million dollars on their Indian missions every year. Now, majority of this goes to support white missionaries who can't speak the native language



and have contempt for the people. They're out there on a big joy ride. It's the only place where you can be a martyr and get in your Oldsmobile and go into the big city in two hours. And so, they've got the best of all possible ego worlds. And I think that if these Christians are really serious that this religion is for everybody, that they should have one gigantic convention, all the Christian Indians in the country and take all the native clergy and just organize them as a board, and say, "Okay, you're going to have an Indian Christian church. All the money we've spent on all this other nonsense, is going to be dumped into a general operating fund, no strings attached, and you can run the whole thing. And you're no longer gonna be a mission. You're eligible to join the National Council of Churches. You're eligible to be on all the boards. This is your church."

VIZENOR: The American Indian Movement in Minneapolis, Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt, made demands for reparations from the Episcopal and Lutheran Church bodies in the United States. I gather, the only significant response was that Christians apparently would like to feel some sense of guilt, agree that that's a good demand, but they didn't get any money yet. Do you see that as a possibility that Indian Christians will organize this next decade and make demands upon the church?

DELORIA: Well, I really hope there won't be any Indian Christians left. I think, you know, I really hope that everybody goes traditional.

VIZENOR: Do you sense a movement in that direction?

DELORIA: Oh, yeah. Even, particularly in South Dakota. You're just on the verge of throwing all the missionaries out there. It's simply that the church, the churches are so involved in Indian politics, that it's bad to throw them out right now because you're going to lose a lot of your leadership that is not yet ready to go fully Indian, and they

might back out on any general move. But, well, when, you know, we talked earlier about Black techniques and Indian techniques. Now, I know Dennis and Clyde, and I don't, you know, agree that the churches owe us money. I don't agree using their form and format to get it. Now, if you go through the treaties, you can see from, about, let's see, 1815 to 1816 on, through the treaty making period and into the period where they have agreements. A lot of treaties, the churches came in and as part of the treaty provision, they were given a lot of land on Indian reservations. You know, whites have been bad to us. So, you always have been going but I think that what Indian people should do is prepare documentation of specific pieces of land that were given to churches earlier. And the church has really went in and talked these people into signing the treaties, and then of course, you know, the chiefs couldn't read the small print in the treaties. All of a sudden some church ends up with a half million dollars of land.

VIZENOR: This was one time obvious when the church and the state has not separated at all.

DELORIA: Absolutely. In the general Allotment Act, all these churches got the right to go in and take the choice pieces of land on the Indian Reservation. I think that not only should we get money for the land they've taken, they should buy back the particular pieces of land that they got out of the treaties and deed it to the tribe.

VIZENOR: That's already a direction of church bodies, they're doing that now?

DELORIA: No, there isn't, but they're in a very vulnerable position because a lot of the land that they got was given to them for a specific purpose. Now, Window Rock, Arizona, there's about twenty-five thousand Indians living in that whole area. Episcopal Church has nineteen acres of prime land down there. That was given to them to set up a hospital.

VIZENOR: That's on the Navajo reservation?



DELORIA: Right, Navajo headquarters. And on the deed, and I've seen the deed, it says when this stops being a hospital then the land reverts to the tribe. Well, most of the churches on the reservation have deeds, the land is deeded to them to run a school for Indians, and when it stops being a school for Indians, why then it's supposed to go back to the tribe. All these churches have held this land as money-making venture. They lease it out to farmers, or else they have... They raise hay on it, merch in the soil bank. And I think instead of getting up and saying you owe us a half million dollars, you should prepare, you know, we should get some guys together, prepare a general indictment, and say we want this land at Mille Lacs because you know that the Episcopal Church got some good land up north.

VIZENOR: Yes.

DELORIA: And that's Indian land. And all of these things should be returned, that would really help out in economic development, land consolidation and help a lot of the people. This you know, this is what the churches really do owe us. It isn't a generalized thing at all.

VIZENOR: And the conclusion of your book, you say to the reader that you have a lot of other critical remarks to make about government and the church and anthropologists and you will state that as soon as you have documentation to present those criticisms. So my question is, in your next book, which you told me you're working on, do you intend to expose some of these other areas that you've been thinking about?

DELORIA: Well, I don't know. I've been working on this for a year, and in the meantime, while you take the two water rights problems, one Heber River in Arizona, the other Pyramid Lake [Nevada]. Now, there's a lot of ways that you can blow the whistle on

what the government's done there, the government clearly liable for, you know, for just frittering away Indian water rights, and it's probably liable to the extent of fifty to sixty million dollars. But I don't want to be one who goes in with such a general indictment of what the government's done, it cuts the ground out for negotiation...

VIZENOR: The facts?

DELORIA: Or tribes, because if they're willing to overlook some of this in return for a future guarantee of water, then I'd screw it all up by coming in saying, well, this is what you guys did. Raising the ego problem, but you know, sooner or later, there has to be a clear documentation where the small tribes have really gotten the shaft. Many of them never had their boundaries surveyed. They can't lease their land. The government pays no attention to them and they are the first ones put on the list for termination. So, these people never had a decent break from anybody, ever since they came under government supervision. A lot of places the governments walked in where the tribes had money in the federal treasury, the government has used their money to do the things that the government likes, and it's just like me walking into some white man's house and say, I'm gonna take your bank account, and go out and build a bridge here so that your neighbors can go across, and you get a whole series of laws where rights of way for railroads and pipelines have been given to private companies on Indian land where Indians should have had millions of dollars of income off of it. And the government just sat down and gave it away. It's all this that has to come out sooner or later, and whether I'm gonna bring very much of it out in the next book or not. I promise you sometime in the future, I'm gonna get the whole crew and just blow the whistle on the whole outfit.

VIZENOR: Do you see issues in the United States and issues among Canadian Indians to be similar enough to lead to a possible united front ultimately?

DELORIA: I, you know, I hope there are, but you know, we're very unaware of what the Canadian, what the legal status of the Canadian Indian band or tribe is. And it seems



to me, they don't get nearly as bad as things are down here. They don't have one tenth of the legal protections that we do on our land. We have the Indian claims commission. So, where the government has cheated the tribes, at least they can come in and get maybe ten percent of what was counted. Canada has nothing like that. New Canadian policy is out and out termination. It is going to create the biggest social disaster the continent has ever seen. It's something that was tried down here in 1954. They were creating pockets of poverty out of fairly prosperous tribes, and to see the Canadian government do this, it is really a threat to us, because it means that this same ideology is going to come bouncing back down across the border sooner or later. So, in a way, the United States Indians have a real stake in what goes on in Canada. And we may have to get involved with it just to protect ourselves, but I wish there was some way that we could really understand the Canadian issues and get some Canadian Indians down to a major United States conference and explain the whole situation of what's going on up there?

VIZENOR: What do you think the federal attitude will be toward Indians during the Nixon administration?

DELORIA: I don't think it would be very bad. It won't be very good, from what I've observed this year, the Nixon administration didn't intend to do anything about any domestic problems whatsoever, and so it didn't want to hurt anybody, but it doesn't want to help anybody either. And so there's just going to be a period of consolidation, and there are enough liberals in Congress to keep the appropriations up, and just... I think the Nixon administration is incredibly stupid in the way it is treating minority groups, because there are a lot of Indians were really fed up and disgusted with the Democrats by the end of Johnson's term, and so Republicans could come in with a halfway decent means of cutting some of the red tape. They could have swung a

substantial number of Indians over to the Republican side, but their attitude is you didn't support us in 1968, so we won't have anything to do with it, which is really poor politics.

VIZENOR: What kind of responses has there been to Louis Bruce, the new commissioner of Indian Affairs? Have Indians responded favorably to that?

DELORIA: Well, nobody wants to say anything, because he's an Indian. You know, you don't want to attack any kind of Indian that's in a position that high for fear that you may never get another Indian in that position.

VIZENOR: Was that the same feeling with Robert Bennett?

DELORIA: Well, it was to start, and everybody was very suspicious of Bennett because he'd been a lifelong bureaucrat. And in the middle of his commissionership, I think most of tribes were strongly behind him, and then toward the end, they really didn't care because he was not able to get any major changes accomplished in Interior Department. So, it really didn't make any difference whether he was Indian or not. They had shown enough support for his Indianness.

VIZENOR: Well, the new commissioner is voicing the same arguments that Bennett did and that's let Indians run their own business and Indian self-determination.

DELORIA: Well, that's easy to say unless you take a lot of these white-haired bureaucrats out of the area offices, and you really do a cutting job on them. Yeah, you can talk all day about Indians running their own affairs, if you have the same bureaucratic structure, the same channels of command, the same people that have been in there since 1940. It didn't make a hell of a lot of sense.

VIZENOR: Well, as a concluding question, would you offer some advice to young Indian leaders coming out of colleges and committed to their own identity and to the resolution of problems on reservations, and also some advice to young Indian leaders like yourself with experience, to write books?



DELORIA: Oh, yeah, I think anything that can be written at this stage of the game is beneficial, even if they take the opposite point of view to what tribal positions are, because all this has to come out, we have to really work out in the Indian community what a tribe is. Right now everybody thinks it's that group of people who live on the reservation, but at least half of the enrolled members of each tribe are off the reservation with the exception of the Navajo and a few others. So, it really becomes a contest for the modern definition of what a tribe is, but the thing I see happening, you can see this happened in the Black community, is that suddenly the national leadership has really gone, you know, after Martin Luther King got shot, the whole thing and even before King, people at the local level, were really building up strong. And that's what you see, there are not gonna be any very well-known Indian leaders from here on out on the national scene, but those people who really consolidated locally, and anybody who thinks these national figures are gonna have to check with them before he can come in their state or their region. So, it's going to be a whole series of very strong coalitions of regional groups, and you can see this, well, in the American Indian Movement in Minneapolis. It really dominates. This, for those of us who are outside really dominates the scene in Minnesota.

VIZENOR: Yes.

DELORIA: And we would have to really be on good terms with those local people, if we were going to come in to any conference.

VIZENOR: If you had the time, in the next year, what would be one or two of the books, which you would write, what you believe are most needed right now to communicate conditions and problems and future directions?

DELORIA: I've been working for three years on what I call Equitable Case American Indian, which is as complete an examination as I can make of the treaties, statutes, all the reported law cases, all of the things that any place any Indian or Indian tribes had a relationship with the government... Get all the recorded cases cross indexed, according to topic, tribe, treaty, and I hope to write about a six to seven hundred page book, and present the Indian side of the legal arguments. Now, the Supreme Court always says that, if you get a case that far, they say either you're wards of the government, or you're a domestic dependent nation. And if you start out your case, on a wardship theory, when you get up to the Supreme Court, they say, "No, you're not wards, you're free people, domestic nation." So you lose. You start out in domestic nation theory, you get up to Supreme Court and they say, "So you're wards of the government, you shouldn't have standing to bring this thing in the first place. Get out of here." So, you can't resolve the Indian legal issues in the courts unless you build a completely new ideology, and this has to be built, I think, around the doctrines of interpretation that the Supreme Court has always used, that all provisions and treaties are construed favorably of Indians because they were the party working out of their own language, and treaties were written in a foreign language. So, any obscurity referred to that. Second, that even though one part of a treaty is broken, the rest of the treaty remains intact, that's been a very important doctrinal interpretation. And I think younger Indians should know this. It'll give them options for activism, and you get to fishing rights up in the northwest and state of Washington comes into arrest individual Indians for fishing. Now, under a hundred different legal theories the Indians could come right back immediately and say, "You can't arrest individual Indians." There's a treaty between the tribe as a political body in the United States. The only thing the state of Washington as another political body can do is to file a writ of mandamus against the tribe, demanding that they police their own member. The State of Washington has no jurisdiction over an individual Indian exercising a treaty right, which is guaranteed by the Constitution. And these are new options to open up for activism, but they



depend on a treaty ideology that we don't have right now, and then is what I'm trying to do, Yeah.

VIZENOR: Well, thank you very much, Vine. And I hope in a year or two, we'll have access to the ideology.

DELORIA: I hope I can do it.

Gerald Vizenor interview with Vine Deloria, Cassette Audio Tape Recording, Gerald Vizenor Manuscript Collection, Minnesota Historical Society. Professor David Wilkins, University of Richmond, Virginia, provided the funds to transcribe the audio interview with Vine Deloria.



INTERVIEW

“We’re Living People with The Past, Not a People from The Past”: Cultural Revitalization at the Myaamia Center

An Interview with Daryl Baldwin & Kara Strass

SHANNON TOLL

This interview took place on October 19, 2023, at the Myaamia Center, a nexus of Myaamia tribal knowledge production and revitalization. Located on the campus of Miami University in Oxford, OH—which is located on the traditional homelands of the Miami Tribe—the Myaamia Center and the university share a deeply unique relationship that developed over years of exchange and collaboration. In the following conversation, Daryl Baldwin, the Center’s executive director, and Kara Strass, the director of the Miami Tribal Relations Office, discuss the origins of the Center and how the work taking place there contributes to building the future of the Miami Tribe.

The terms "Myaamia" and "Miami" will be used throughout the interview; "Myaamia" is the tribe's name for itself, and means "the downstream people," while "Miami" is a derivation of this name and how the tribe is recognized as a sovereign nation, the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma.¹ The text has been condensed for publication, but a full recording is available.

Daryl Baldwin: *aya. kinwalaniihsia weenswiaani. niila myaamia. tipeewee išiteehiyaani oowaaha eepiaani.* I'm glad to be here. My name is Daryl. I'm a citizen of the Miami tribe of Oklahoma. First and foremost, I also serve my community as the executive director of the Myaamia Center here at Miami University. My background and career has largely been in the emerging field of language and cultural revitalization and working with the community and the university that's in partnership with the Miami Tribe around building capacity and infrastructure to support the needs of the community as it pertains to language and cultural revitalization.

Kara Strass: *aya. mahkoonsihkwa weenswiaani. niila myaamihkwia. meehkimwiaani owaaha myaamia nipwayonikaaniki.* My name is Kara Strass. I serve here at the Myaamia Center as the director of the Miami Tribe Relations Office. I came to this work starting out by getting a Master's degree in student affairs here at Miami University and came on full time in 2018.

My job is really to serve as the liaison between the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma and Miami University. Part of that work is to provide advising and support for the Miami students who attend Miami University. Really trying to build strong relationships with them so that I can understand what their needs and challenges are to ensure that they can be successful here at Miami.

Interviewer: Could you all discuss a bit about how the Myaamia Center was founded, what its history is here at Miami University, and why that history is so distinct?

Baldwin: Yes. I would say that what used to be the Myaamia Project in 2001 really emerged as a result of the last couple hundred years of history. The forced relocations



of the 1800s, the boarding school experiences of tribal members, the social pressures to assimilate and to dispose of our traditional language, culture, knowledge system finally hit an apex, I think, at some point where the community recognized those losses. There was a recognition on a national level.

Congress began passing important legislation like the Native American Languages Act of 1990, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. I think there was just a growing consciousness of what took place in the colonization of this country and the impacts that that had on tribal communities. Through that process, tribes retained their inherent right to govern themselves. Tribes began to reposition themselves both economically, socially, culturally, I think especially in the middle part of the 1900s to really start, one, recognizing what happened but then, secondly, what is it that we're going to maintain and preserve as we move forward.

Our unique identities as tribal people, at least in our view, have to be central to that. We have to have economies. We have to build social infrastructure. There's a lot of capacity building on the national level that has to happen on the tribal national level. Through all of that important work, we can't lose ourselves. We have to remain culturally distinct people.

There are health benefits for our community through that work. It was that motivation that began to emerge in the early 1990s that caused tribal leaders to think, what can we do about this? There were some individuals who were doing some grassroots work at the community level around language and cultural revitalization. We had lost our speakers by the mid-20th century, so we had to turn to documentation. We didn't know how much documentation was available.

We had to go searching for that. We ended up collaborating with a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, by the name of David Costa, who now works here in the center. He began much of his early linguistic research in the late 1980s. A lot of things were starting to come together. At one point, the tribal community just really realized we didn't have the resources to move this forward, whatever it was going to be and whatever it was going to look like.

They reached out to their friends at Miami University, which they already had a relationship with that dated back to the 1970s. It started with really just getting to know each other. I think Kara can talk more about the beginning stages of that. Moving ahead, the tribe asked the university, can you help us with language and cultural revitalization? The university said, well, what do you want to do? The tribe's like, well, we're not really sure, but we think there's probably resources there that could benefit us. The university agreed to create a position for three years.

They called it the Myaamia Project because it was just a project. They would try it out and see what might become of it. I was asked to come and serve in that position in 2001. As they say, the rest is history, maybe the early history of the university relationship, because I think that factors into this pretty significantly.

Strass: Yes, so we talk about this relationship beginning in 1972. That is when the chief of the tribe at that time, Chief Forest Olds, he was in Cincinnati on tribal business and had always heard that there was a university that carried the name of our tribal people. He decides that he wants to visit, but he didn't tell anybody. He arrived on campus entirely unannounced and goes into the president's office.

I always wish I could have been a fly on the wall when he walks in and introduces himself as the chief of the Miami Tribe. Unfortunately, the president of Miami at that time, President Shriver, he was out that day. Some other folks, they took him on a tour of campus, they took him to football practice. That's really how we talk about the start of



this relationship. He comes back two years later in 1974. Unfortunately, [he] passes away not long after that second visit.

Chief Leonard, who becomes chief after Chief Olds, he was chief for almost 30 years. He also started coming to campus and building relationships with administration, with the alumni office, with faculty on campus. I think we can't ignore the fact that, when they stepped onto campus in those early years, they were stepping onto a campus that was already having a lot of conversations about their Native mascot. That contributed, I think, quite a lot to the relationship in those early years.

Looking back on what happened in those first couple decades of this relationship, I think Chief Leonard was really interested in "how do we provide some education, allow people to learn about our tribal nation?" The tool that they had at that time was this mascot. They tried to provide some authentication, some training for especially the student who was presenting himself at football games and things like that. Chief Leonard would come here quite a lot. People would go to Oklahoma.

I think in the late '80s and early '90s, there was this question of, okay, people aren't really able to learn from this mascot. It's still built in a stereotype. People are still bringing with them their own ideas of what Native people are when they see somebody out performing on a football field. He was very interested in "how can we work together to create educational opportunities for the Miami University community, but also for Myaamia people?" That's why they worked to create a scholarship program for Myaamia students to come to Miami.

Our first students arrived in 1991. It's a full decade before Daryl [Baldwin] arrives on campus. Three students in 1991. At that time, the way that students learned about and were encouraged to go to Miami University is that Chief Leonard would call them up-

[laughter]

Strass: -and tell them about this opportunity and ask them if they would be interested in going to Miami and getting this tuition waiver. There was really nothing created for them. Yes, they received a great financial offer. The students, they didn't even know each other. There was no reason for them to get together. They were from different parts of the country. We have pictures from like campus visits when Chief Leonard would come, but as far as I can tell, that's really the only times these students ever got together.

Those students weren't especially successful academically in the first 12 or so years before the creation of actual programming that brought Myaamia students together to learn about their history, language, culture. I'm assuming we'll get more into what that looks like-

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Strass: -now, as opposed to, what it looked like in those early years when there wasn't anything for Myaamia students here. They're stepping onto campus. The mascot was still here. That's the part that I didn't really finish the story. The tribe was considering the mascot for a long time. Was, I think, mostly ambivalent, but on paper supportive of the mascot for a long time. That changes in the mid-1990s. The tribe asks the university to change their mascot in 1996. They do at the very next board of trustees meeting; they vote to change.

I think that was a real recognition of the sovereignty of the Miami Tribe and also recognition and support for this relationship that had been built for, I think, 24 years already at that point. I think that that really laid a foundation of increased trust, of thinking of Miami as a partner that they could go to. That's in 1996. The changes happened in 1997 and I think really sets up this idea that they could come to Miami University and ask for support in cultural revitalization just a few years later.



Baldwin: Because the relationship is not going to be about a mascot. What's it going to be about? There was a paradigm shift at that time. It was one that was—we didn't know what it would be. Miami University didn't have then and still doesn't have a Native Studies program. What is that relationship? They needed something to really define that beyond just the student scholarship program, so Myaamia Heritage Award.

Interviewer: I remember when we first arrived here, the coterie of us from Dayton, and you mentioned—I'm paraphrasing here, but you said that, right now, you're on Myaamia sovereign space, in this area, I believe, or in this building. This is Myaamia homelands, and this is a Myaamia space in here. If you could maybe talk about, when you think about, there's not a Native Studies program here, there's not that kind of an educational apparatus. Could you talk about why the Myaamia Center is so unique compared to other kinds of programs that exist across the US?

Baldwin: Right. The beginnings that Kara described, it really is the foundations that formed the relationship. Once the mascot was terminated and we decided to move beyond that, then we started to gravitate more towards education. There's a couple different ways to look at that. One is education that could be provided to tribal youth who might come here and get degrees in whatever they may be interested in.

The tribe was thinking about education around how are we going to preserve, promote Myaamia ways of knowing, being, expressing through language, through culture, through dance, through art forms, all of those sorts of things. There's a different education that's equally important to us. What Miami University did, whether it was conscious or not, is they created a space that the tribe could step into and explore that, what that might look like because there were no models.

I remember coming to campus, and I pretty certainly cleared out a closet on the third floor of King Library for me to step into. I remember sitting down thinking, okay, now what? There really weren't any models. We had to explore. What was important at that time when they set up that position that I took is they connected that position to student affairs. The reason they did that was because, at the time, student affairs was primarily responsible for maintaining the relationship between the tribe and university. They wanted to keep me out of departmental politics.

We were not tied to any academic unit on campus. Working with student affairs, who are people trained to work with students, and they were the relationship builders, right? It allowed us to have a space under the radar where we could quietly explore what might be possible here for ourselves. That lasted for almost a dozen years. The first stage of the development of this whole entire thing was us exploring in this space that they created for us. What's important is that the tribe was directing my activities, not the university. That was really critical too.

I was waking up in the morning, coming into work, first and foremost, thinking of my community. What could we do to help our community heal from all of the things that have placed us in this position of loss and the need to recover things? We didn't plan that. It just organically happened. I think it was really, really crucial that that happened. We didn't really come out from under that radar until 2013 when we became an official center. We had grown significantly.

Our student numbers have grown. The staff numbers have grown. We're at 47 students this year, and 19 full and part-time staff in the center. The amount of growth over the last 20-plus years has just been remarkable. I don't know how you could plan something like that. It literally just happened. Now, our challenge isn't figuring out what to do. It's responding to the growing needs of the community and, more recently, the university.



Because being in a relationship, we agreed to share this work on campus. Even though the work is primarily driven by and for the tribal community, being in a relationship, we agreed to share that. Miami University is figuring out how that's going to happen, how we can share across campus more effectively.

Interviewer: My next question would be in that same vein, is what kind of research and knowledge production takes place at this center? It sounds like it's starting to shape the university itself in a larger way, a bit more now, but what is the sort of research, knowledge production work that takes place here?

Baldwin: I think there's two things that happen here that are important. The Myaamia Center is really a research and educational development unit, an arm of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma that exists in an academic setting to build capacity around those needs. The Miami Tribe also has a cultural resources office, which is equally staffed with approximately the same number of individuals as the center. We work as a left and a right hand on behalf of the tribe.

The cultural resource office located on tribal [lands], within the reservation, on the Miami Nation's reservation really is there to handle NAGPRA-related issues, so these are Native American grave repatriation issues. Anything that really has more important sovereign responsibilities tend to fall into the cultural resource office. They also do a lot of community programming because they're right there physically where the tribe is.

We, on the other hand, are more interested in the content, which comes from a lot of our broad-ranging research activities, but then also teacher training and trying to help build up the educational infrastructure that's needed, whether it's online education, in-person education, teacher training, whatever it may be, curricular development, things

like that. That's our role, and then we work together with the cultural resource office to do community programming.

That's what we've evolved into. In terms of the range of research, it started out as really primarily a language effort. When I came here in 2001, I'm a trained linguist. I was interested in the revitalization of my heritage language. I was doing already a lot of work in the home with my family at the time. My wife and I homeschooled for 18 years for that purpose. My wife did the vast majority of that work, but I provided a lot of the language content from the research we were doing.

What we've learned in language revitalization is it's not really just about language. When we think about what language is, language has a community and cultural context. As we begin to grow the effort, the revitalization effort, we couldn't ignore that community and cultural context. We found ourselves looking at ecology, especially botany, understanding our ancestors' relationship to the land, to the plants, to the animals.

Storytelling started to emerge, what's the role of storytelling. We had a number of traditional narratives, winter stories, *aalhsoohkaana* we call them, that we had been working with for many years. We wanted to reintroduce them back into the community. There was a fragment of the community that was really interested in revitalizing the old form of ribbon work, which was an art form. It just goes on, history topics, ecology topics, cultural topics, just a wide range of things.

A lot of what we focused in on had to do with interest of the community, availability of someone who might have some expertise or training in that area and then funding. It really was an organic growth in terms of what areas we research. Today is quite fascinating because we have so many more tribal members involved, and especially a whole generation of youth that are coming into this who've come up through our youth programs since they were young children.



I would say a big chunk of the staff here in the center came up through our youth programs. We've literally trained the next generation of cultural bearers, knowledge bearers, to be able to step into, and this is the important part of the center, we needed to create a professional space where our younger people could bring their skill sets and their professions and feel like they're working on behalf of their tribal nation in a professional setting, whether it's research, educational development.

It's really nice to see younger people bringing an interest in weaving, various art forms, things like that, being able to grow and breathe life back into the culture, and it becomes their expression because it's not a static thing. We're living people with the past, not a people from the past. We're not interested in being our ancestors. We can't do that. We're interested in capturing the things that represent us as a cultural group but are also good for us and are appropriate in the present.

Some things are going to get left behind, but some things we're going to move forward and revitalize. We do it now as a group. It's not driven by any one individual. It's very community-oriented, which also means that the staff in the center are very interdisciplinary, which again I think is unique in academia. We have historians, we have linguists, we have technology folks, student affairs folks all working in the same space for the benefit of a particular group of people-

Interviewer: That's such a better idea.

Baldwin: -that are from the same place, right? The other thing we really wanted to do, we didn't want our youth just to feel welcome here in Miami. We wanted them to feel like they belonged here. This is their ancestral homeland, and this space is their tribal space by which we do the work for their community. Creating that, I think, that's not

what Native Studies really does. It's mostly purely an inter-tribal academic, which has a role, which is important.

I'm a graduate of a Native Studies program. I value that because I learned a lot about Indian Country, and I learned a lot about the history of the United States through the lens of many Indigenous tribes, and I think there's a really important value to that. I'm fully in support of Indigenous Studies programs. What was missing for us is our own form of education around our own identity as it pertains to language culture and other forms of knowledge.

Interviewer: Could you talk a bit about some of that process that happens when it comes to language development? When I was here last time, there was a discussion about having to add words to the dictionary that fully reflect Myaamia experience now. Could you talk a bit about how that happens here at the Center?

Baldwin: Looking purely at just the language and the language reconstruction and the revitalization side of this, we have a set archive, and for us, there's a number of documents, manuscripts, and they've been spread all over the country and Canada that span about 270 years. Being able to gather, digitize, and start an analysis process is huge, and it'll take generations.

We have so much material to work with that it's just going to take us a long, long time to really fully have access and to develop a level of understanding for a portion of it. There's some things in the historical record we may not ever fully grasp or understand, but there's a lot of very useful material that can feed into a revitalization effort, so we're focused on that.

First thing is we didn't have the tools to do that outside of the linguistic training. For instance, what do you do with thousands and thousands of pages of linguistic material from archives in a dozen different spelling systems in two different languages, French and English? How do you bring that all together into what format so that you can even work with it? We were forced to actually develop our own software, our own archival



software, to handle that material, because any of the database software that was made available to us didn't do what we wanted it to do.

We had reached out to the National Endowment for the Humanities for help in 2012. We eventually created what is known today as the Indigenous Languages Digital Archive (<https://mc.miamioh.edu/nbol/ilda-prospective>), because we now share that software with tribes around the United States. For us, we needed a piece of software we could work with. We knew we had a static, bound set of archival materials to work with, and that was designed to be worked by linguists. We also needed to create a complement of that, which was a living dictionary.

A living dictionary was for teachers of the language and for our programs and for the community in and of itself to use. Looking at 200-year-old materials is not very useful for most language learners. It had to be transferred into a format that was usable. Even though this is static, the actual living dictionary continues to grow. We understand enough of our language in terms of grammar that we can provide new inflected forms.

There's a slow process of word innovation where we start creating words for new things like computer, *kiinteelintaakani*, "that thing that thinks fast," that's what we call it. It has a name now, it's a noun, and we can talk about computers. It'll take a long time, because what happens in a process of language oppression, languages are always evolving. All languages are evolving based on what they come into contact with. English certainly does the same thing for a lot of the things that we do there.

What happens in a situation where language is oppressed is that natural process of creation and evolution gets oppressed. There's a long period of time where the language didn't continue to create new things like our ancestors did. We have a lot of

catching up to do, and it'll just take a long time for that. This is very much an intergenerational process.

We're looking to build the foundational pieces that are going to allow us to not only continue this work but grow this work in a way that's sustainable for the community. We're just the foundation builders for it. Hopefully, this next generation will take it to the next level, and future generations will take it from there.

Strass: I think one aspect of this that's interesting, and maybe you can speak to it a little bit more, is how we try to ensure that we're not just doing translation as we come up with new words, but that we're actually thinking about our language and culture, and how to create new words. Does that question make sense to you?

Baldwin: Right. There's a way to be embedded within a knowledge system, a cultural environment, where you start to build an intuition for the way in which people think about things. The natural process is in a speaking community where the culture is still vibrant and living, and you can immerse yourself in that. You start to have an intuition for how people do things, think about things, talk about things, things like that.

To some degree, and I don't even know how to quantify this, you can spend enough time in archival materials to get a glimpse of that. We've tried to build an intuition over time, and there are times we'd say, well, I know what you're saying, but it doesn't sound very Myaamia. I would say it probably more like this because it just feels more like the linguistic materials we've been embedded in for now 30 years.

There is that intuition that—and you can't get that through a college program, right? I think what Kara's really pointing to is there's a certain kind of training that happens here to do this work for the Miami Tribe that can really only happen right here.

Interviewer: Creating that context.

Baldwin: Yes, that cultural language context, and learning how to think as a Myaamia person in Myaamia.



Strass: I think it might help to give a tangible example that somebody—land you can make requests through our dictionary for words. People are always coming up with things that they would like to be able to say. I remember one of them, somebody, had a family member who was going through some sort of like illness or something. They wanted to talk about that person being like a warrior in fighting this illness.

Then when that request came in, we had to think about the fact that, from a Myaamia perspective, English is so full of war and violence terms that being a warrior is seen as this really beneficial, good thing. What we don't want to do is start bringing that context of English into Myaamia where violence and war terms become part of our everyday speech because that's not what's seen in our language.

Instead, thinking about, okay, well, what is it that's good about what this person is asking, but can we give you an alternative that still represents what you're trying to say through the language, but isn't necessarily just a Myaamian translation of "warrior."

Baldwin: Right. Even the word for disease, *mintaakani*, it means "they have done something poorly." Our ancestors would oftentimes think about disease as something we've done to ourselves. If you think about how disease is often talked about in American English, we're going to fight this, we're going to beat this, as if it's something that you go to for fight, like Kara said, like war.

The very framing of that becomes a challenge when we're working with the community to help them understand how we might think about things or at least reflect on them in a way. It may be that—we know a lot about disease today and then cures for disease where maybe the notion of I did something wrong here doesn't always apply.

Interviewer: Sure.

[laughter]

Baldwin: It gives us that historical and cultural context. Then our challenge is how do we want to think about these today and how do we want to support our loved ones and our community in dealing with sometimes very difficult and tragic illnesses that come along.

Interviewer: Yes. How language is always changing, but recognizing when it's been inflected by non-Myaamia frameworks that are less productive in that way. That's really interesting... What kind of classes do you offer Myaamia students? What are the requirements of this program? How does this experience unfold for your students?

Strass: I think we had to think about—one of the things that's very unique about this program is that, for many of our students, we know them well before they come to Miami University.

Interviewer: Oh really? I'm impressed.

Strass: [laughs] Exactly, right? For many of them that have come through our programs or even if I don't know them, one of the first things usually that we find out is who are they related to?

Interviewer: Right, yes.

Strass: A vast majority of our students come in having had a sibling or a first cousin already through this program or maybe second cousin at the farthest. I think it's at this point, probably it has to be at least 70% are coming in with a very close relative. It makes this experience very different.

Interviewer: They're coming from all across the nation.

Strass: They're coming from all across the country, right. Today, our community of about 7,000 tribal citizens lives in 49 states as well as internationally. This is actually one of the opportunities to bring the most diverse concentrated number of Myaamia



people from across the country to a single place where they can spend significant time thinking about their Myaamia identity and engaging in educational opportunities.

I start working with students primarily in their sophomore and junior years as they're thinking about college and help them think about what that application process to Miami might look like, for students who are coming from across the country, knowing like it's a big decision to send a student from California to Ohio. I work with them through the whole process leading up to their application to Miami. I'm not involved in the admissions process at all. That's partially by design.

We want all of our students to apply and to be accepted into Miami based on Miami's standards, because what we don't want is students coming who can't be successful. It's not beneficial to them in any way for them to show up on campus and not be able to meet the standards. Then as soon as they're accepted, then I kick back in with information about our program. Even as soon as their orientation sessions here on campus, I'm meeting with them. I'm talking about what this experience will look like.

We have our first-year students move in a couple days early so that they can connect with us and connect with each other. Really, the goal of the Myaamia Heritage Program, which today is now a full four-year program, is really about connecting our students with the Myaamia community. For them, it's primarily the other students and staff who are here in Oxford and with their Myaamia knowledge system.

There are a few requirements for them around some events. We have a retreat. We have a lunar new year party. We have a variety of things that they attend throughout the year but the biggest being the Myaamia Heritage course series. We have three years of a one-credit class that students take. It's a cycle. It's not a hierarchy. All of our students in their first through third years are together in the class. It just rotates.

Whatever the topic is in the year that a student arrives, that's where they start. Then we go through this cycle of classes.

This year we are in contemporary topics in sovereignty, so really talking with students about what is sovereignty. It's an idea that many of them may not have even thought about before. Also, just what does it mean to be a citizen of a tribal nation? How do you express that? In the second semester, we look a lot through the lens of art. Next year will be ecological perspectives in history, so allowing our students to learn more about their environment, about how our ancestors understood that environment, but also thinking about our landscape as our history book.

That's how we connect those two topics. We spend a lot of time outside as long as the weather will allow us. Then once it gets cold, we move inside and talk more about history. Then the third year is Myaamia language and culture. That's much more intensive language learning, although language really infuses throughout all of the years and ecology infuses throughout all of the years. Obviously, there's a focus for each one of those years.

Then in their senior year, our students do an independent study project. The intention is that they can combine what they've learned in their major or minor with what they've learned at the Myaamia Heritage course series. They can create a project that gives back to the community in some way. It's just two semesters of a one-credit project. It's not a giant requirement for them.

Our goal is it's allowing students to process, okay, now I've taken in all of this knowledge over four years. How do I apply that to my life? How do I give back to my tribal community in some way? That can take a lot of different forms. That might mean a student writing and illustrating a children's book. We've had students who've worked on database creation. We've had students who've worked in communications and marketing, in art, just across the board, kinesiology.



What we ask students is to be able to apply that knowledge in some way. For a lot of our students who have come through and now our staff at the Myaamia Center, it was like the foundation of what became a job for them, which is really—

Interviewer: You're one of those students?

Strass: I came here for my Master's degree.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Strass: Yes, I was not here as an undergrad. Even through the time in my Master's that I went through those classes, it really provided a foundation of knowledge and understanding that allows me to then apply to the work that I do with students. I meet with all of them at least once a semester, and that's the other requirement of this program. I see them every week in class. I see them at a variety of events and things.

I really do try to get to know them really well so that we can support them in whatever their challenges and successes are and ensure that they can be successful. Most of the students here would not come to Miami University without this award. That's very clear. They tell me that, I understand that. Miami was not going to be their first choice for many of these students. Then we have a responsibility to ensure that they can be successful. That's really what my position is, and I do that primarily by creating relationships across campus. I'm not an academic advisor, but I know how to connect students with their academic advisors and what questions to ask and those types of things. I'm not a counselor, but I have a direct contact in student counseling who I can make sure that students can connect with if they have some sort of issue.

It's about providing that support system to students. Then in addition to me, there's the 18 other staff people here who can help them explore different ideas, if they're interested in it. Again, the goal of this is all about community building, about allowing

them opportunities to engage with their Myaamia identity while they're here. What we found is, in the 12 years before the heritage class was created, our students had a 56% six-year graduation rate, higher than the national average for Native students, but not great, obviously.

Today we have a 92% graduation rate for Myaamia students, higher than [Miami University's] average. I think, our numbers have increased dramatically. Started with 3 students, now we have 47 students. I think a lot of that comes because our community trusts us to send their students here to have their best interests at heart and understand that this is probably the only place where you can get this.

You don't have very many opportunities in your life to spend so much time engaging with these topics. It's a really unique opportunity for our Myaamia students. We have 113 graduates of this program who, like Daryl said previously, really are the next generation of Myaamia leaders in a lot of ways. They serve on the committees with the tribe and with the university.

They are instructors in our summer youth programs. They're our cultural practitioners. They work for the tribe or consult for the tribe.

Baldwin: Business leaders.

Strass: There's a lot of ways that our graduates have become active participants in community revitalization and are really leading to thinking about what our community will look like moving forward.

Baldwin: It literally wasn't there 30 years ago. Absolutely, literally wasn't there. The numbers of people that gathered in the community for annual meeting were mostly the older generation. Kids played outside. Teenagers didn't bother to come. Those numbers were small. That's completely transformed compared to today. You'll get 200 people, all families, all generations, coming together for National Gathering Week. We start on Wednesday and go all the way through Saturday and Sunday.



The revitalization activity has completely transformed. What we've noticed, over the years, is that there has been this huge positive impact to the community. It's caused us to start thinking about the role of language and culture, not only in youth identity formation, but in community wellness. We're just starting that research now. We were recently funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to develop a wellness model for the community, based on revitalization work, to strengthen our understanding of what processes are at work and what the impact is in the community and how we might grow that. We're really excited about that new research that's coming out of our Assessment and Evaluation office here in the center.

Interviewer: That next step.

Baldwin: That's the next step.

Interviewer: And it keeps developing.

Baldwin: Yes, exactly. It's all just new frontier because there's just not a lot of research on the impact of language and culture revitalization on Indigenous communities. We're having to create our own research so that we can understand it better.

Interviewer: Is that where the National Breath of Life Archival Institute comes into play?

Baldwin: Sort of. That's an interesting question. National Breath of Life was a program that started in the 1990s, mainly out of California, the University of California, Berkeley, because California had the most Indigenous languages spoken anywhere in the United States. They also had a large number of those communities that had either lost their speakers or on the verge of losing their speakers.

Archival materials was becoming very important. National Breath of Life was created, or Breath of Life was created, to begin working with those communities around archival

materials. In 2011, those organizers began to think more broadly that, the idea of getting tribal members into archives, getting digital copies, and then taking those back to the community to help support their language activities has more of a national scope.

They reached out to the National Science Foundation, and in 2011, they were funded to create a national version of it, and that's where National Breath of Life comes from. I've been an instructor in the Breath of Life, in the National Breath of Life, and even some regional Breath of Lifes for many years. In 2015, the National Breath of Life organization recognized that the Myaamia Youth Center was growing and becoming stable, and National Breath of Life looked like a very viable program in the future, and so they wanted to give it an institutional home.

They asked the Myaamia Youth Center if we would take it on. The reason we said yes was mainly because that has been the focus of our work, archive-based revitalization. We saw it as a way that we could not only take the tools we had built, like the Indigenous Language Digital Archive, and through National Breath of Life, start sharing that with other communities that were at different stages of developing a community-curated language archive, but we could also learn from those communities as they were building their programs out.

National Breath of Life is our pipeline to support and learn from other tribal communities, and so it's become a very important program for us.

Interviewer: I did have a few more questions, and one of them was, you mentioned that when you did—this is back to our earlier conversation, that when your children were being homeschooled, that you were able to create a lot of the materials that were being used, the course content, if you will. Can you talk just a bit about what those materials sometimes look like when we think about like that body of knowledge? Just a few examples would be great.



Baldwin: My motivation to homeschool and to pursue language was really driven on the need for me as an individual to give meaning, purpose, and understanding to my own heritage that I claimed. That launched me on a new path, if you will, toward discovery. Because there was nothing there, there were no tribal programs, there was no Myaamia Center, there wasn't anything, and 1991 is when my wife and I really started to look at this. 1990 is when the Native American Languages Act was passed, so there hadn't really been enough time for really much to grow. We were alone.

We were alone in the process, and it really wasn't even understood, at that point, what role archives could even play in such an effort. There was a lot of uncertainty. It was an unprecedented effort, so like any unprecedented effort, there's a lot of questions, there's more questions than answers. We decided to move forward with it, which also meant that if we were going to do something in the home, we had to first learn ourselves, and then we had to create our own learning materials.

Interviewer: That's intimidating. [laughs]

Baldwin: Yes, very intimidating. The kids were young, and so we learned as a family together, and we used the homeschool environment to structurally share that information. My wife created a lot of the materials, whether they—we had a body parts game where all the body parts were labeled, and the kids would learn different body parts. They would create little stories in the Myaamia language and read those, especially to the younger siblings.

We tried to create a space in the home that was a Myaamia space, and then that was the safe space by which we as a family could use Myaamiaya as much as we could. That also motivated me into the field of linguistics, meeting David Costa as a trained linguist, and that changed the way that we understood the grammar of the language. We

started reconstructing fuller sentences, communicating more, and so my kids grew up in that environment.

At the same time, I was starting to learn that there were other families in the tribal community that were interested in the same thing. We started doing summer camps, weekend programs, all unofficial, not really funded by anybody. There was no tribal funding at that time. That's where I learned that there were others from my generation essentially that were interested in the same thing, and I'd say that would probably form the nucleus of what has become this effort.

Interviewer: You've always been doing this.

Baldwin: Yes, since I was in my late 20s.

Interviewer: I mistakenly thought that you were first trained as a linguist, and then got interested—so it was the opposite.

Baldwin: That was the opposite.

Interviewer: That's extraordinary.

Baldwin: Yes, I went from looking at language materials thinking, I wish I could make sense of this, communicating with [Dr. David Costa, Director of the Language Research Office at the Myaamia Center] who would eventually say, "I think you need a degree in linguistics." I went from wildlife biology to linguistics as a Master's, just so that I could support this effort, which was a huge risk because there were no jobs in this.

Quite frankly, we had to create the job that I had here because it didn't exist. Yes, it's been an interesting journey, that's for sure.

Interviewer: It's been a whole journey.

Baldwin: I think I never would have guessed it would have had this impact.



Interviewer: I know that the center takes trips to Oklahoma a few times a year. Could you describe those trips and what they're meant to accomplish for the students or how they bring students into these different spaces?

Strass: Sure. The Myaamia Tribe has several large events each year. In the summertime, it's our annual gathering. Really, the primary part of that is getting together as a general council to vote in our elected leaders. Lots of our staff and even students come to that, but because it's in the summer, it's a little bit harder. Everybody's not in the same place.

The other large event that happens every single year is our winter gathering. It's always the last Saturday in January. To me, it's one of our most fun events because the idea being, it's wintertime, there's not business to be done as a community. It's really just a time to come together and have fun and gather as a community. There's a couple of things that happen at that event. The first being winter storytelling [*aalhsoohkaana*].

Daryl already mentioned that we have these winter stories that can only be told in the winter story cycle. This is the primary physical gathering of people where storytelling takes place. We have storytellers from across the country who come in for that event. Then the next night, we also have a stomp dance. Now we're, I don't know, I think 22 years into having an annual stomp dance at that event, where many people from tribes across Oklahoma come in for the stomp dance.

For many years, other tribes helped us in putting on that stomp dance. That's something that we've been revitalizing in our community again and are working up to the ability to really run that ourselves. This happens just as our spring semester is starting. It's a unique opportunity for us to take our Myaamia students. We have a bus that goes. For lots of our students, they've never been to Oklahoma before.

Lots and lots of students when they go to Oklahoma, it's their first time. I think that's such a fun event for them to experience that. We also take faculty and staff and non-Myaamia students on this trip, which is always very interesting. I think a lot of people tell us, even people that we're really connected with, "I've heard about this relationship. I've heard about the work of the Myaamia Center, but I didn't really understand it until I went to Winter Gathering."

I think stepping into that community context, recognizing the impact of this work in our community, really shifts people's understandings. We're planning for that event already in January. I think we'll have a big group going again this year. It's such a wonderful opportunity for us to gather.

The other opportunity we have for our students is they can be counselors in our summer youth programs. We have a week of camps in Oklahoma, and we have a week of camps in Fort Wayne. Our students are really just—they're stepping in as role models, counselors to these programs. Most of them tell us, they learn as much as any of the participants do in that week.

It helps a lot because then all of these younger students meet Miami University students, and they're like, "Oh, those cool college students. They come from Miami. I want to go to Miami." It's like the best recruiting tool we've ever had is Miami students who come in as counselors in those summer youth programs. We have students from the time they're 10 or like 11, "Well, I'm going to Miami." Then they know students and staff by the time they arrive here on campus, which is a very different experience, obviously, than your average college student who, even if they had parents, maybe who went to the same school, you still don't have that connection to people when you arrive.

Interviewer: Such an extraordinary difference from that first batch of students who came through in the '90s, like to have someone just feel already a part of the space, like even at such a young age.



Strass: I wasn't here, obviously, in those early years, but I've heard a lot of stories about what it was like to even just try to get those students to come together... They didn't know each other. All of those things, and now to walk into our classroom and, sometimes it takes a while to get them to settle down because they're excited to see each other. It's just such a giant difference in the experience. That's why I think, when we talk about the success of our work, and the academic and graduation rates are great. I think people are always looking for, "Well, what's the one thing that you did that led to that?"

It's like, "Well, you can't take one piece of this out. You can't take out the support system. You can't take out the community building." I think the thing that's hopefully clear through this whole piece, but I think it's worth being explicit about it, is one of the things that's very different about this experience is, because we have a relationship from this university with a single tribal nation, Myaamia language and culture and values infuse everything that we do here. When you're on another campus and have an intertribal experience, that's just not the case.

Not to say that that's bad. None of us feel that way, but you're not able to dig into the same level of understanding and identity development that we're able to. When we stand up in front of a class and the first thing we say to students is *aya eeweemilakakoki*, "hello, my relatives." That's a literal thing. We're talking to people that we're related to. Even our students talk about this a lot, that they have a responsibility to each other and to care for each other because we are this kinship network.

I don't know of any other experience where that happens, right? It's, I think when several students from a family come to a single university, it's like this big—they write stories about it. Here we are with hundreds of students who've now come through this program who are all family.

Interviewer: Crafting that larger future you were talking about.

Strass: Yes.

Baldwin: Right. For a community that has experienced forced relocation, became fragmented for a number of reasons, and they're now living in diaspora, we have to find ways to come together and reconnect. The revitalization effort is providing those various environments to do that, whether it be physical, online, or whatever they may be. It is community rebuilding, yes.

I think most community members recognize that, for the nation, this is a healing process. Looking at our recent history, we're trying to recover from those things that happened at no fault of our own but are our reality. We have to get on with the mending part. We can't stay in that space too long because it's not healthy to be there. We have to get on with rebuilding our nation, connecting the generations, and having fun and celebrating that.

Interviewer: Joy.

Baldwin: Right. Yes, that's what has to be the goal. Our number one goal in the youth programs is to have fun. The learning will take place. You bring the right people in, that learning will take place. The goal is to have fun. Our young people love to go to those programs. They encourage their cousins to come. They eventually grow up and come to Miami University. They spend four years here. Then they become adults and parents. We're just now starting to experience that, where a lot of the ones that came through our early programs in the late 1990s and early 2000s, they're parents who have kids now. Very different generation.

They come to annual meeting. They bring their kids with them. It's a very different way of engaging today than it was 30 years ago.

Interviewer: The sustainable model you were talking about that continues to replicate itself and radiates outward.



Baldwin: Right. Exponential growth is now our challenge in all areas. Tribal leaders struggle to support us because they fund a lot of the activities of the center. I would say that's another big important thing, is we're primarily funded by the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma and Miami University.

If we're going to be directed by the tribe, then the tribe is going to invest financially into this effort.

Interviewer: That helps keep you out of some of the university politics and demands and things like that, which I think is something that those other wonderful Indigenous Studies programs encounter a lot, are those like institutional pressures and things like that.

Baldwin: Yes. We take our direction from the tribe, not the university. We can say that because the money is behind that.

Strass: It is, again, I keep using the word unique, but it is so unique in that way.

Baldwin: We don't mean that in a way to push back.

Strass: No, of course.

Baldwin: We mean that in a way to protect the integrity of the work that we're doing and to find more legitimate ways to share and to support the university. We want to support the university work in a committed relationship with the university.

Interviewer: I think that pathway that you're discussing that first it's your community. Then in that way, by serving your community, you can better serve the university because it comes from this space and that context and that set of ethics.

Baldwin: The university doesn't have to be responsible for that. It's not really the responsibility. It's our responsibility. It's ours as a community and as community members to be responsible for our community and for also taking on the responsibility of how to share that appropriately.

Interviewer: I think that's a wonderful note to end on—the idea of sharing appropriately.

[END OF AUDIO]

Notes

¹ For more information, see the “Miami Tribe of Oklahoma” webpage at <https://www.miamination.com/>.



REVIEW

Rebecca Nagle. *By the Fire We Carry: The Generations-Long Fight for Justice on Native Land*. William Collins, 2024. 336 pp. ISBN: 978-0-00-872500-6

<https://www.williamcollinsbooks.co.uk/products/by-the-fire-we-carry-the-generations-long-fight-for-justice-on-native-land-rebecca-nagle-9780008725006/>

When thinking about the largest restoration of Indigenous land in the history of the United States, one might not immediately think the catalyst would be a 1999 murder case in Oklahoma. In *By the Fire We Carry*, Rebecca Nagle outlines the details of two court cases that led to this restoration, weaving in the history of the Muscogee, Cherokee, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw Nations and their continued resistance to the genocidal policies of the US that are foundational to the court rulings (223). Nagle meticulously guides the reader through these histories and the stories of many involved, creating a gripping and momentous account of two historic court rulings affirming Indigenous sovereignty and treaty rights in the US, while also weaving in her own family history and a sensitivity to the complexity of the cases. I echo Nagle here in starting this review by asking readers to take care while they read: the cases discussed hold deep wounds for the victim's families, the many others involved, and those affected by the wider history of colonial dispossession and systemic violence (4).

The book begins in Part One by outlining the first court case that brought one of the contemporary Native fights for sovereignty to the Supreme Court. On August 28, 1999 (9), Patrick Murphy murdered George Jacobs on Vernon Road. Patrick was from the Muscogee (Creek) community of Ryal, "the heartbeat of Muscogee culture. It's where elders still speak the language, where Creek Methodist and Baptist churches stand, and where, on Saturday nights, people still dance at Muscogee ceremonial grounds" (10), just north of Vernon and Vernon Road. When Murphy was prosecuted and sentenced to the death penalty by the state of Oklahoma, one piece of evidence was contested between witnesses: the location of the murder (20). Four years later, federal public defender Lisa McCalmont was investigating Murphy's case and discovered that the place where the police and prosecution had said the crime occurred was over a mile and a half away from the memorial to Jacobs that was placed at the scene of the crime (39). Nagle writes,

Many public defenders would not have given the discrepancy this much thought. What difference could a mile on a dusty road possibly make in the life or death of a condemned man? But Lisa was no ordinary public defender. Thanks to her background in geology and oil, she knew that a mile could make all the difference in the world. (42)

It was this curiosity that ultimately upheld the Muscogee reservation, and an ensuing eight others (194), and saved Patrick's life. As "[i]t turned out that the land, like much of Oklahoma, had a complicated history," so the state of Oklahoma may not have actually have authority to prosecute Murphy (42-43). Interspersed in Part One of the book is the history of forced removal and of the Five Tribes, and it is at this junction, one can see why Nagle is the right person to tell this story. Her connection to this history is personal - as a member of the Cherokee Nation, one of the Five Tribes, alongside the Muscogee Nation, forcibly displaced through the Trail of Tears. She leads the reader through the life and legacy of her great-great-great-grandfather John Ridge and his father, **SOULLY**, or Major Ridge (23), laboriously recounting **SOULLY**'s history, from the scorched earth campaigns by the colonial militias that made him and his family refugees in 1776 (25), to his political career that turned him into a traitor for many in the Cherokee Nation today (24). Telling the history of the Muscogee Confederacy, the divisive entry of Muscogee and Cherokee into the War of 1812 (30-31), the Battle of Tohopeka - "one of the largest massacres of Native Americans in US history" (33) - and the many fraudulent, genocidal, dispossessive actions and treaties by Andrew Jackson, amongst many others, Nagle leaves no detail unreported.

In speaking about this history, Nagle centers survivance. When Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, the genocidal removal of the Five Tribes saw many people put into concentration camps and, while making the journey out west, numerous unthinkable deaths at the hands of the enforced treaties signed with the US (106-107). Tribal nations took up different tactics to try to combat the policy of ethnic cleansing before removal under the Jackson administration, and, Nagle notes, "every act of resistance helped us save what we still have - whether it's pieces of our homeland, language, ceremony, or the plain fact that we survived" (98). Nagle notes of this moment, "[w]hile it is largely forgotten, Indigenous resistance formed the first large-scale political protest movement in the United States" (73). Contesting this act in the courts led to legally defining 'domestic dependent nations' (75), undisputed Indigenous rights to land, that states could not alter rights of Indigenous nations as "Indian affairs were 'exclusively' handled by the federal government," and that treaties are the "supreme law of the land" (76). The three rulings that legally determined this continue to have global consequences for Indigenous peoples (Wolfe 2006).

After removal, the Five Tribes' new lands and reservations in Oklahoma were divided and disintegrated again in the late 1800s when the "US government decided rather than push Native people onto shrinking reservations, it would assimilate Native people to white society by privatizing their land" through allotment (134). This, alongside the unfolding court case, is the subject of Part Two of the book,



highlighting how the Dawes Act of 1887 would turn communal land into private property and thus turn tribal citizens into “self-serving capitalists” (139), even though many nations voted down the proposal (140). This “brought a wave of new investment, and before the ink was dry on the allotment agreements, oilmen swarmed Indian Territory” (153). Nagle outlines how the oil boom, alongside other natural resource extraction and property development, led to Native land being ‘grafted’ through “lease, sale, swindle, stealing, deception, fraud, and sometimes violence” (155). However, while allotted land was leased and sold, restrictions on allotted land meant that tribal citizens still owned most of the land (156). When Oklahoma became a state, restrictions were reduced through the racial system of blood quantum and only remained for some land owned by people with a certain degree of “Indian blood” (158). The life of Millie Naharkey, a Native woman whose land was drilled for oil and never saw any of the profits, or any freedom or justice in her lifetime, due to being deemed legally incompetent and placed under an oppressive guardianship, exemplifies the unjust treatment of Native peoples at the hands of the oil and gas industry detailed in the book (173-4).

Fast forward to 2016 and *Murphy* was heard by the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals with the Muscogee Nation now participating in the case to argue their reservation still existed as it had never been disestablished by Congress (79-82). When the Court upheld the reservation, Oklahoma appealed the decision, and the case went to the Supreme Court in 2018. Nagle describes the apprehension and small chance of success in the Supreme Court due to a long history of rulings that, “rather than uphold the law to protect Indigenous nations, [...] remade the law to fit settlers’ needs,” and the “sheer ignorance of its justices” (121). Nagle notes, “Supreme Court justices are no better or worse than the general public; most people don’t know what a federally recognized tribe is, how jurisdiction works on a reservation, or how treaties fit into our Constitution” (121). The contradictions in the history of federal law with Indigenous nations and the unpredictability of those interpreting the law meant the defense had no way to know how the court case would go or if they would win (122). In the Supreme Court, Oklahoma’s lawyer couldn’t provide proof that the reservation had ever been disestablished, relying instead on a faulty history of allotment (125-126) and falsified statistics of how many people in prison could be released if Oklahoma ceased to have authority over the territory (129).

When the decision wasn’t released by the Supreme Court in the summer of 2019, it fell to another appeal, that of Jimcy McGirt, to decide the status of the reservation (150). McGirt had seen *Murphy*’s case on TV and knew his crime took place on the Muscogee reservation, yet he was prosecuted by the state of Oklahoma. “For Muscogee leaders, it was hard to think a case involving the sexual abuse of a child would determine the status of their reservation” (152), writes Nagle, yet when McGirt’s case went to the Supreme Court, the fate of the reservation was decided (152). The decision came on July 9th, 2020, and was written by Supreme Court

Justice Neil Gorsuch, “a textualist” who “believes it is the role of the courts to interpret, not create, law” (171). Seeing this, Nagle writes that, before she’d even read the verdict, she “started screaming,” knowing that the court had ruled in favour of the defendants as Congress had never disestablished the reservation, despite Oklahoma arguing it had intended to (185).

Part Three of the book takes the reader through the aftermath of the *Murphy* and *McGirt* trials. On the day of the verdicts, “across eastern Oklahoma, tribal citizens celebrated the victory with joy in abundance. But it was also joy that cut hard and deep” (185). Nagle writes, “[o]ur blood and our bones knew how much had been lost to reach this one act of justice” (185). The decision confirmed that “despite Oklahoma’s century of gaslighting tribes, the state was not different. The law applies here just like it does everywhere else” (186). In opposition to the Lockean rationale for opposition by Chief Justice John Roberts that white squatters worked hard for the land so they could lay claim to it (187), the ruling would lead to cases that also upheld the Cherokee, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw Nations’ reservations, or half of the state of Oklahoma (190).

The resonance of these cases is not that they are groundbreaking, but that they are “radical”: as Nagle writes, “Muscogee Nation wasn’t asking the Tenth Circuit to right the wrongs of history or give back their land. Their reservation, legally, was still theirs. They were simply asking the court to follow the law” (87). Throughout the history of forced displacement and removal, as well as contemporarily, laws protecting Indigenous nations have been continually ignored by the US government and states when they are “inconvenient” for them (188). In this instance, the law was followed.

A key part of the book is that it addresses the stickiness of sovereignty for many Native nations, specifically through the history of slavery and Freedmen’s status within tribal nations. The history of chattel slavery within the Muscogee, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole Nations meant the nations “came to be called the loaded moniker ‘the Five Civilized Tribes’” (69), in “Euroamerican parlance” as Patrick Wolfe notes (396). During removal, “over three hundred thousand enslaved people were moved from the Eastern Seaboard to the Deep South” (Nagle 102), and the prosperity of the nations after removal is partly due to enslaved labour (136). For the Cherokee Nation, in the 1828 Constitution, Black Cherokees were not permitted citizenship (69), and the Muscogee Nation adopted the same policy in their constitution in 1979 (Walker). From Nagle’s point of view,

If Indigenous nations are truly sovereign, then we are responsible for our mistakes. Like any other government, we are responsible for the harm we have caused. We cannot hold the United States accountable for the wrongs of history committed against us, but not take account for the wrong of chattel slavery. [...] On the long path of repair, citizenship is only the first step” (202).

Since the book has been published, Rhonda Grayson, a descendant of people enslaved by the Muscogee Nation whose story is featured in the book, has been granted citizenship (Walker).



Nagle's years of activism for Native rights and the six years spent reporting on this case shine through in the book (2); the minute detail give an immediacy to the unfolding court case decisions, thereby offering a profound understanding of the people, politics, and complicated relationships involved in the cases. The detail she provides highlights the stringent and colonial bureaucratic measures within the courts, for example, that landlines had to be used by those speaking during Covid hearings (164), and that traditional tribal dress isn't acceptable to wear in courtrooms but western dress is never questioned as "advocating for one side or the other" (116). Her own investigative journalism within the case is highlighted in the book where she fact-checked Oklahoma's inflated claims of criminal cases being overturned after the decision and the number of people left unprosecuted because federal and tribal courts did not have capacity (214).

Overall, throughout the book, the reader is made to understand how this decision is a "visceral sense of justice" for Nagle (3). The book enunciates what Tone Bleie, Sheryl Lightfoot, and Elsa Stamatopoulou call the "consistent active refusal to acquiesce" of Indigenous peoples in the face of settler borders and colonial policies (17). It oscillates between the history of treaty-making and the unfolding of the *Murphy* and *McGirt* court cases to piece together an engaging and accessible account of the colonial laws regarding reservations, allotment, and the broader legal history governing Native nations in the US, as well as unpacking the complex notion of sovereignty for many Native nations today. "Indigenous land, sovereignty, language, and culture are all connected. Whenever we lost land, our languages and culture also suffered" (204), writes Nagle; however, when Muscogee citizens were forcibly moved out west, "[e]ach Muscogee town took care to keep their council fire alive through these acts of cruelty. The fires they carried still burn today" (101).

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REVIEW

Smokii Sumac. *Born Sacred: Poems for Palestine*. Roseway Publishing, 2025. 178 pp. ISBN: 9781773637259

<https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/book/born-sacred>

“today
my body is in pain”

The opening lines of poetry in Smokii Sumac’s *Born Sacred: Poems for Palestine* succinctly introduce the themes of the book: its ritualistic daily rhythm of poems-as-prayers, the embodied empathy of the poet, and the violence that pervades the lives of colonised people. Globally speaking, Indigenous identity is a political response to colonial relations, a provisionally embraced collective identification that acknowledges the structural relationship between local and culturally-specific struggles for sovereignty and the global networks of extractivist capitalism, harnessing the power of solidarity for anti-colonial politics. Perhaps the most famous example of this cross-cultural solidarity in Native American/First Nations history is the funding sent by Choctaw and Cherokee people to Ireland in 1847 during the potato famine (Shrout 2015). That early example of Native North Americans recognising those colonised by England as sharing Indigeneity was followed by others in an ongoing politics of recognition that gained power throughout the twentieth century – and which continues into the twenty-first (Rennard 2021).

The creative and critical connections made repeatedly between Native North America and Palestine since the British government published the Balfour Declaration in 1917 extend and expand that genealogy. In one recent and particularly well-known example, the Arab American National Museum’s 2016 exhibition *The Map is Not the Territory* brought together thirty-nine artists whose work examined commonalities and relationships between Native American, Palestinian, and Irish subjects of settler colonialism (Heath and Painter 2016). Reading Smokii Sumac’s newest collection of a hundred poems for Palestine, we accompany the author as he confronts these parallels almost in real time. With breathtaking honesty, Sumac reveals his initial ignorance about, and emerging

knowledge of, the structural—and sometimes material—relationship between the Israeli occupation of Gaza and his own Ktunaxa experience of settler colonialism in Canada.

Sumac's learning experience is clearly informed by his queerness—a subject position that he explored directly in his first collection, *you are enough: love poems for the end of the world* (2018), and which is now nuanced by its inflection with cross-cultural empathy. Queer identities, like colonial ones, are produced in relation: expressions of queerness are a reflection of, reaction to, and resistance against a policing of gender and sexuality intended to maintain social and economic structures rooted in reproductive heteropatriarchy. In precolonial Indigenous spaces that did not ascribe to that ideology, queerness looked different—but it still existed, in the sense that in any social order there will be people who blur, cross, combine, exceed, transgress, or simply refuse the categories of behaviour and belonging they are offered. At its heart, queerness is a scepticism about categories—albeit often a playful one—that only escapes the pitfalls of individualism through queer people's recognition of queerness itself as a common experience. The poems in *Born Sacred* reveal that, for Sumac, as for so many queer Indigenous poets before him, colonized queer experience is precarious, joyful, frightening, exhausting, ceremonial, loving, profound, and dangerous. In all of these things, he finds it is analogous to the Palestinian experience in Gaza.

At the same time, throughout the collection Sumac acknowledges the incommensurability of his experience and those in an active war zone. Sometimes these admissions are explicit, as in "19": "i tell my therapist / yes we survived genocide / but not like that // active / war / zone // my therapist / reminds me / comparison / doesnt make sense / in this context" (44). Others are more oblique, as in "25": "i think of writing some / comparison // yesterday i forgot the / shopping list at home / and in Palestine // Osama / writes his name / on his hand // to be remembered // to be remembered" (56). As this suggests, there are echoes and repetitions throughout the hundred poems that almost give them the formal character of a single epic poem. True to that genre, *Born Sacred* tracks the agonistic journey of an individual through unfamiliar landscapes. In Sumac's case, the journey is emotional and intellectual, and one by one the poems reveal a vulnerable and occasionally painful story.

As you would expect from such a project, there is a productive unevenness to the individual poems, which range from tensely crafted to unabashedly emotional. At their best, they are both: while the poems in this volume are not consistently great, they are never, to borrow a word from literary critic Seth Perlow, bad. In his condemnation of bad Instagram poetry, Perlow rejects the "cliché, trite notions, and cloying sentiments" that pervade the genre as "lack[ing] any sense of literary invention" (Perlow 2025, 250). To be clear, he is writing about a genre of poetry to which Sumac does not aspire: a commercialised and commercially successful exploitation of a platform designed to reward content that appeals to the broadest spectrum of consumers—not just readers—possible. Whereas the Instapoets attracting Perlow's derision actively pursue generic sentimentality and have over a



million followers, Sumac has just over four and a half thousand, and in between his poems he eschews sponsored posts in favour of quiet celebrations of personal milestones and professional joys.

At the same time, he revels in the specific formal qualities of Instagram as a poetry platform that literally shapes and frames the words it presents. The interrelation of form and content is a defining characteristic of poetry and in an important sense, the poems on the printed pages of *Born Sacred* are remediated texts. In his original medium, Sumac plays consciously with the aesthetics of individual posts and the distinctive Instagram grid, sometimes carefully alternating frames containing white text on black ground (or the inverse) with photographs of trees, rivers, loved ones, and other relatives. In this aesthetic sense, he is very much an Instapoet, gently making fun of himself in comments like, "I posted too early but it'll mess up my grid view if I delete it and repost" (8 August 2020). In this way and other, more serious ones, Sumac intentionally builds community as well as a following online.

Throughout *Born Sacred* the poems acknowledge and document online interactions that lead to learning, empathy, and growth. In a very real sense, the comments that accrete around each posted poem or image, and the intertextuality, intentional and otherwise, of Sumac's own posts and the platform as a whole, are a vital to the work's significance. The book's origin on a social media platform structures the logic of *Born Sacred*, which posits poetry as a political act of witnessing. To witness is to document the present moment as it happens; where another writer might take weeks or months to craft a poem, Sumac has chosen the obligation of writing quickly. In this sense, he actively transforms the commercial premise of the platform into a political tool, using the aesthetic power of accumulation to render his poetry an act of accountability. Those interested in Sumac's project would do well to follow the poet on Instagram as well as buying this collection in book form.

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REVIEW

James J. Donahue. *Indigenous Comics and Graphic Novels: Studies in Genre*. University Press of Mississippi, 2024. 192 pp. ISBN: 9781496850492.

<https://www.upress.state.ms.us/Books/1/Indigenous-Comics-and-Graphic-Novels2>

James J. Donahue, in his study on Indigenous comics, offers an extensive overview of Indigenous graphic narratives created by Indigenous authors. His book presents one of the few academic works published on the intersections of Indigenous Studies and Comics Studies, bringing attention to the rapidly growing body of works that Indigenous comics constitute and to the lack of academic attention that these works receive. Echoing Craig Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999) and Hilary Chute's *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere* (2017), Donahue highlights the lack of scholarly attention both Indigenous Studies and Comics Studies receive from Literary and Cultural Studies to showcase that the intersections of the two fields occupy an even more conspicuous research gap (3). Comics as an accessible medium facilitates communicating social, political, and pedagogical messages to wider audiences. Their appeal transcends different ethnicities, ages, as well as social and economic backgrounds (Bernardin 481-82), which positions comics as a versatile medium for Indigenous artists to communicate narratives of survivance to a wide audience. In 2008, Indigenous presence within the comics' creative landscape was sparse. Even though publishing companies such as Marvel and DC featured Indigenous characters, they were created by non-Indigenous artists and enforced harmful stereotypes associated with these communities. Michael A. Sheyahshe's *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study* (2008) presents a thorough study of these works.

Donahue acknowledges the early representations of Indigenous peoples in comics created by non-Indigenous authors but chooses to bring attention to the comics created by Indigenous authors. He acknowledges non-Indigenous artists' collaborations with Indigenous authors while arguing against applying a version of blood quantum to these works to determine to what extent they are Indigenous (14). Rather, he underscores that these collaborations between Indigenous authors and non-Indigenous artists elucidate an artistic realization of how Indigenous and non-

Indigenous people can co-exist. His approach to what constitutes Indigenous comics also evokes Cheryl Barlett and Mikmaw elders Murdena and Albert Marshall's two-eyed seeing principle, which encourages seeing from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous epistemologies and seeing from the other eye with the strengths of Western approaches (Marshall, qtd. in Kovach 191). Thus, these works encourage more than mere co-existence between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Rather, the collaborations between these authors and artists accentuate the strengths of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artistic approaches to create narratives that are transformed on the comic book pages. They reflect the agency of the Indigenous authors, and the artistic visions of the illustrators, colorists, and letterers involved in these works.

Indigenous Comics and Graphic Novels: Studies in Genre (2024) is organized according to the commonly encountered genres in Indigenous comics. Chapter 1 focuses on Indigenous superheroes; Chapter 2 examines Indigenous science fiction, while Chapter 3 is on Historical Narratives. Genre as a framework provides categorization, however, as Donahue notes, it is also unstable (15). Hence, he focuses on experimental narratives that defy genre conventions in Chapter 4. Even though Donahue mostly employs genre as an organizational tool rather than a comprehensive theoretical framework, he also highlights that Indigenous peoples utilizing certain genres to insert themselves into cultural contexts in which they were misrepresented or excluded constitutes political survivance (18). For instance, he suggests that the scarcity of Indigenous superheroes that do not adhere to mainstream stereotypes in comics denotes that "Indigenous peoples are not seen as strong national leaders who can embody 'America'" (18). Thus, Indigenous superheroes are not merely Indigenous versions of the Marvel and DC comics, but they communicate political commentary on the superhero genre's imperial roots (27), the socio-economic issues in reservation life (28), and the long history of non-Indigenous populations' inhumane treatment of Indigenous peoples in academia and museums (34, 36).

Donahue connects the field of Comic Studies to science fiction through their reception within literary studies as unsophisticated forms of narrative expressions (55). He highlights that even though mainstream science fiction envisions post-racial futures, it also perpetuates colonial ideologies of manifest destiny as well as missionary and anthropologists' fantasies (55-57). Thus, Indigenous science fiction, a genre that has been gaining traction especially after the publication of Grace Dillon's *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012), not only confronts settler-colonialism but also works within the parameters of a genre that continues to promote colonial and neo-colonial ideas (59). Exploring Indigenous futurisms in comics, Donahue presents a thorough list of Indigenous works that focus on time and space travels as well as technological advancement narratives in which the Indigenous peoples are positioned beyond the colonial past. Donahue also presents analyses from a variety of works such as *Moonshot* vols. 1-3 and Cole Paul's *Dakwākāda Warriors* (2016) to highlight what Indigenous authors



have envisioned on the pages of these comic books both against and within the parameters of the genre.

In addition to envisioning new futures, Indigenous authors and artists also challenge the hegemonic historical narratives to communicate ongoing Indigenous experiences. Echoing Mark Rifkin's notions of *settler-time* and *Indigenous temporal sovereignty*, Donahue highlights that Indigenous peoples conceptualize time differently from settlers. Rifkin juxtaposes Indigenous temporal sovereignty against what he terms settler-time to highlight "the chronogeopolitical dynamics of settler colonialism" (93), which aim to both spatially and temporally dislocate Indigenous presence from "the process of periodizing the U.S. past" (94). Thus, Donahue argues that Indigenous historical narratives should be read as not mere retellings of the past but as a commentary on how the past should be understood (85). Hence, he situates the past within the present as the past actively informs the present lives of Indigenous peoples. To elucidate this, he analyzes two graphic novel series: Katherena Vermette's *A Girl Called Echo*, and David Alexander Robertson's *Tales From Big Spirit*. Both series reimagine the Métis past through prolepsis and analepsis facilitated by time travel through sleep, daydreams, and thoughts of the characters. Donahue's decision to focus on these narratives as historical, though unintentionally, also highlights the unstable nature of genre as these works could easily be classified as "Native slipstream" narratives, which include works that feature time travel components, present time and space in a non-linear manner, and defy genre classifications (Dillon 3).

Use of genre, albeit briefly, expands beyond an organizational tool in Chapter 4, which focuses on Indigenous experimental graphic narratives. Bringing forth Chute's work on experimental literature, Donahue underscores that the designation of *experimental* connotes works that obstruct normal reading (115). Donahue also argues that the designation of experimental in Indigenous narratives is due to their reception by non-Indigenous readers. He suggests that many Indigenous works, such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), align with storytelling traditions of their communities but are considered experimental because they do not adhere to the norms of Western literary conventions (116). He also suggests that experimental works require readers' active participation in the meaning-making process or sometimes even in the completion of the final product. (115) As an example, Donahue analyzes Michael Nicoll Yagulanaas's *Red: A Haida Manga* (2009). He highlights that, illustrated in Haida art style, Yagulanaas's Japanese students have also identified *Red* as a manga and thus, were involved in the naming process of the graphic narrative.

Indigenous Comics and Graphic Novels: Studies in Genre presents one of the first examples of a much-needed study on Indigenous Comics by Indigenous authors from Turtle Island. The research gap Donahue identifies in his introduction is so

palpable that his work presents a necessary first guide to inform scholars who wish to work within the intersections of Indigenous Studies and Comic Studies. It should also constitute a staple of any Indigenous Comics curriculum at higher education institutions. However, in an attempt to bring attention to as many works as possible (Donahue also provides a list of other works he could not include within his chapters in his Coda), the book can only gloss over most of these works rather than fully engage with them critically. Thus, his analysis of these comics, while valuable, can and should be expanded upon. I perceive this as an invitation for other scholars to engage with Indigenous comics as the number of these works grows rapidly and cannot be contained in a single book. The research gap Donahue identifies to connect the two fields, though accurate, is also not sufficient to explicate why scholars should pay more attention to Indigenous comics. The comics medium, through its multimodal affordances, provides a plethora of opportunities to Indigenous authors and artists to realize their narrative visions. Thus, rather than addressing only the research gap Donahue highlights throughout, scholars should also engage with these works because of what the medium can afford to authors, artists, scholars, and audiences. Even though Donahue does not focus on what the comics medium specifically can do, his analysis of the comics provides readers with invigorating ideas as to what these works offer.

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REVIEW

Annie Wenstrup. *The Museum of Unnatural Histories*. Wesleyan Poetry Series, 2025. 104 pp. ISBN: 9780819501875.

<https://www.wespress.org/9780819501820/the-museum-of-unnatural-histories/>

Dena'ina poet Annie Wenstrup's debut collection, *The Museum of Unnatural Histories*, celebrates curiosity as a way of navigating the world. Modelling an archival practice that extends beyond the assembly consisting solely of documents, the poems present a mode of curation that is as careful as it is probing in its response to "cataclysm's aftermath" (Wenstrup xviii), insisting on the endurance of Indigenous lifeways despite colonial catastrophe. Through poems that range from the formal complexity of the sestina to sukdu/stories and imagined tours that meander through the museum space, Wenstrup's poems at once guide the reader through this imagined museum of the author's own making whilst also relinquishing the assumed authority that we collectively ascribe to the author/curator.

This is a collection that is as invested in challenging the ways in which culture is represented, as it is in showcasing the selection of stories themselves. During an extended Museum Sovereignty Fellowship at the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center in 2021, Wenstrup worked closely with museum staff to think about how heritage institutions can encourage innovative engagement with collections beyond the space of the museum itself. Wenstrup brings this interest in accessing culture to her poems, which thematically cluster around the survivance and sovereignty of culture in the wake of colonization. Yet as a writer, the collection displays an evident preoccupation with issues of narrative, power, and representation—central concerns in both literary and curatorial critique. This balanced approach results in a compellingly crafted debut that uses a poetic imagination to ask what it is that a museum *could* be.

Wenstrup adds to a growing number of Indigenous writers who locate the museum as a focal point in their work. As cultural debates regarding ownership and representation reach a critical mass, Indigenous writers and artists have used their craft both to critique colonial narratives and, perhaps more importantly, to imagine

Indigenous futures beyond the institutional framework of the museum. Holding historical typologies accountable for the epidemic of violence against Indigenous women and girls in particular, Wenstrup's poems ruminate on these inheritances whilst refusing to be wholly bound by their legacies.

From the outset, Wenstrup's museum refuses the assumed binary between nature and culture that the traditional Eurowestern museum upholds through its cleaving apart of human and more-than-human life. Told largely through the entwined voices of Ggugguyni (the Dena'ina Raven) and the character of The Curator, *The Museum of Unnatural Histories* embraces the process of transmission by which stories are passed from ancestors to descendants, from writers to readers. In "Ggugguyni in the Museum Parking Lot," Wenstrup invites readers into a scene in which the boundaries between human and animal are blurred; Ggugguyni picks over human detritus of "diaper bags, car sets, children [...] fruit, / Goldfish, and fries" as the narrator of the poem recognizes how her own "ungainly" nature perhaps destabilizes her security within gendered categories, becoming "more harpy than girl" (xviii). These seemingly fixed statuses—human/animal, girl/"not a girl" (9), history/future—are thrown into disarray in Wenstrup's Museum, revealing the fragility of such familiar typologies in the first place.

The poems repeatedly return to the chronopolitics of colonialism, a theme that is echoed elsewhere in Wenstrup's work. In "From Here," an essay for the journal *About Place*, she observes that "[i]n the stories of colonization and conquest, time is a linear line forward" (n.pag.). Linearity equals "progress," and "progress" (in colonial terms) equals the organization of time and space into neat, discrete categories. This colonial twinning of temporal and spatial arrangements is interrogated via a series of footnotes that act as temporal markers throughout Wenstrup's collection. Riffing on the iconic form of the crew member's log, these footnotes are bracketed by stardates from *Star Trek* (and occasionally earthdates) which "push"—in Mark Rifkin's terms—"against the imperatives of settler sovereignty" (ix), surfacing the simultaneous promise and pitfalls of science fiction's embrace of an alternate chronopolitics.

A recurring figure in these footnotes is Chakotay, the First Officer aboard the USS Starship *Voyager*. Somewhat infamously known as the "first" Native American (main) character in *Star Trek*, Chakotay exemplifies the series' commitment to a narrative of teleological progress whilst simultaneously exposing such blind faith in linearity as a colonial fantasy. Deliberately ambiguous, Chakotay's tribal affiliations are never explicitly stated in *Voyager*. He is simply "Native American," a cipher for liberal fantasies of ethnic inclusion rather than indicative of Indigenous sovereignty. This is, of course, a *Star Trek* specialty; the original series (1966-1979) significantly featured a multicultural main cast, and the 1968 episode "Plato's Stepchildren" is still commemorated as the first (widely) televised interracial kiss between Captain Kirk and Chief Communications Officer Nyota Uhura. Social progress in *Star Trek* is unidirectional, even though part of the show's appeal is its ability to play with the fixity of time and space through its reimagining of both future and past. The fact that the show's producers sought the input of none other than J. Marks or, "Jamake



Highwater," in creating Chakotay's character is illustrative of precisely the bind that *Star Trek's* "Rodberrian optimism" (Wenstrup 9) encapsulates, particularly when it comes to Indigenous representation. Marks was exposed in the 1980s as a fraud, having deliberately misrepresented himself as Cherokee. Whilst Chakotay's character was intended to be a Native American "first," the actor who plays him is of Mexican descent. Whilst I appreciate that this can sometimes be a somewhat tense distinction and is not precisely the same as the ethnic appropriation undertaken by Marks, the realization that Indigenous representation in *Star Trek* is not, in fact, Indigenous representation lays bare the myriad contradictions that Chakotay's character encapsulates. Devoid of any real depth beyond being included in settler wish-fulfilment of deep space as a post-colonial fantasy, the promise that Chakotay's character seemingly represents for a speculative timeline in which Indigenous peoples are integral in and to the future is fundamentally warped. Yet representation can be a powerful thing. "Exhibit B: Un-filed Correspondence" presents a bittersweet letter addressed to Chakotay himself. The narrator laments the "unreality" of the First Officer, wanting to "want you. Because you were a wanted / NDN, someone I wanted to be" (66).

If Chakotay is a figure who embodies both betrayal and belief, Wenstrup's thematic preoccupation with the speculative also offers an alternate chronopolitical poetics. As readers, we sit with the poet as she watches looping *Star Trek* reruns. As we watch together, the idea of a "time-paradox" (Wenstrup 9) slowly bleeds into something beyond an impassioned fictional peril for the series' characters. In the Museum of Unnatural Histories that Wenstrup imagines, time moves in cycles, a continual stream of televised entertainment, news, and violence that Ggugguyni and The Curator pick over in their assemblage of material. Rather than conforming to a linear narrative, Wenstrup's selection of cultural references reveals the nature of The Museum as a heterotopia. Ggugguyni and The Curator do not attempt to create order, theirs is instead a recursive practice that treats so-called "victims" like JonBenét Ramsey, the six-year-old girl whose still-unsolved murder was the subject of salacious theories and extensive media interest in the 1990s, and the actual people behind the MMIWG hashtag with care and respect, seeing them as people who deserve memorialization beyond objectification and/or erasure. The linear form initially suggested by the use of *Star Trek*-style stardates in these footnotes rapidly disintegrates as the reader realizes that these too are being played and watched on an endless network loop. Unable to escape the documentation of History, we as readers are instead invited to sit with Ggugguyni and The Curator as they continue to collect and tell stories, ruminating over them as we look and re-look at their collected exhibits. In this quiet, reflective space, we might glimpse an alternative to the relentless "line marching West over a fixed map" ("From Here," n.pag.) that colonialism insists on imposing.

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REVIEW

Kinsale Drake. *The Sky Was Once a Dark Blanket*. University of Georgia Press, 2024. 80 pp. ISBN: 9780820367309.

<https://www.ugapress.org/9780820367309/the-sky-was-once-a-dark-blanket/>

Kinsale Drake's first collection, *The Sky Was Once a Dark Blanket*, begins with an imperative: "I must sing" (1). The title of this first poem, "*spangled*," evokes "The Star-Spangled Banner," as well as the broader idea of an anthem, or that impetus to find a rousing song that reflects a cohesive fabric of a particular cause or community. Through multifaceted threads - from nature sounds to blues and classic rock - Drake's collection brings together different musical references and invites the reader to listen in to the junctures between them and consider, what might an original anthem of shared communal experience and inheritance sound like? How would that collective music be imagined, embodied, and passed on?

In "August," the speaker describes herself as "My mother's soft instrument" (2). She becomes a vessel to play a song, one that originates from her mother. Indeed, various forms of music pulse through the collection - from a three-part series on Mildred Bailey, a half-Diné jazz singer, to KTNN, a reservation radio station. But what's most striking about *The Sky Was Once a Dark Blanket* is the way it channels and responds to lyrical ancestry, particularly the traditions Drake inherits and the calls she heeds from other Indigenous women writers. An early poem, "NDN Heartbreak Song," has the postscript *After Joy Harjo*, and another poem, "Remembering," reads as a response to Harjo's "Remember" from her seminal first collection *She Had Some Horses* (1983). Although the content responds to Harjo, "Remembering" begins with a quote by Sandra Cisneros: "Dreams are poems your body writes" (qtd. in Drake 17). As Cisneros was a contemporary of Harjo at the Iowa Writer's Workshop in the 1970s, Drake's postscript and literary allusions capture the indivisibility of lyrical inheritance - one voice or influence cannot be cleanly separated from another.

Harjo's well-known poem asks the reader to remember various aspects of identity, ancestry, language, and nature. The anaphora "Remember" becomes an abstract

call not only to bring aspects of belonging to mind, but to embody that state of remembering, to become a container for all aspects of being and matter that lead to this moment: "Remember your birth, how your mother struggled / to give you form and breath" (35). Drake's poem "Remembering" begins by acknowledging the difficulty and near impossibility of heeding such a call: "How do I start a story I never lived?" she asks. The poem aims to construct factual, sparsely described events from her parents' lives prior to her birth: "My mother had a horse. / Her father held the horse's face gently. / I make this up, because I know he was gentle" (17). These biographical details relate to the speaker's biological parents, but the allusion to horses also reflects the literary ancestry of Harjo and the mythic association with this animal that pulses through her first collection.

Ultimately, Drake's poem acknowledges the limitations of using the intellectual, rational, temporal mind to embody a state of recall or access. "I make this up," she writes, and admits that she wasn't alive when the events she describes took place. Instead, the speaker leans into the power of dreams as a source of non-linear ancestral knowledge: "But at the very least / My body dreams" (17), the poem ends.

Drake was born in 1995, and her first collection grapples with what it means to be young, Indigenous, and queer in a late capitalist, technology-warped landscape. She channels other contemporary writers, such as the Maori poet Tayi Tibble, who was also born in 1995. A poem entitled "THE GREENHOUSE," dedicated to Tibble, describes the experience of encountering native plants two thousand miles away from her home. But it is her poem "Ancestors' wildest dreams" that reads as an original, conceptual riff on Tibble's "My Ancestors Ride wit Me." Tibble's poem conveys experiences of hardship and discrimination, but the tone is one of firm resilience:

My ancestors ride wit me.
Don't tell me wtf they would do.
I know them way better than you
and I know the wild
variety of things
they had to do
to get me here. (79)

The firm end-stopped lines and the address to an unknown "you" convey a refusal to be doubted or silenced. While Drake's speaker also conjures the presence of knowing ancestors while going out at night with friends, her approach embraces the fragmentation of uncertainty. She explores how the word "resilience" is easier to write on a social media post than it is to achieve as a lived experience. Drake's poem begins, "r drunk on the sticky floor, "; internet slang and the shortest abbreviation of the verb "to be" may come across as tentative and compromised. Indeed, the sticky, unavoidable lure of capitalist fast-food establishments and Western fulfillment takes hold and entails a certain loss of ancestral memory. But throughout the stanzas, the resounding third person carries a sense of kinship, a certainty that even if you are falling, failing, forgetting and struggling to remember, you are not alone. The "we" of shared experience resounds through the poem and is never compromised, even



amongst lingual fragmentation and confronting uncertain memories:

r drunk on the sticky floor
of a Denny's texting gma Ayoo aniinishni
& crying in the same hot breath abt
not knowing the right word for apology

if one exists keyboard smashing
resilience resilience resilienceResielance
as we delete IG so we don't
have to see ppl out-sacred-ing

each other. Maybe we're only sovereign
in bed sometimes drowning (56)

While Drake's poems don't channel the same overt toughness as Tibble's "My Ancestors Ride wit Me," her speaker's innate resilience (no matter its social media spelling) is never in question. The reader senses that despite the mixed emotions, doubts, and impossibly posturing environment of contemporary culture, Drake's narrator is also thriving and reveling in the fumbles and pleasures of young adulthood. Her speaker reminisces about a childhood that actually wasn't that long ago. The poems brim with the novelty of nostalgia that dawns for the first time after college - a late adolescent awareness that childhood is gone, and the shenanigans of young adulthood are suddenly ironic and tentative. She achieves a smooth cadence at the nexus of English, internet slang and Indigenous language - a shared dialect between the speaker and her companions. She trades certainty for questioning, which carries the authority of wonderment:

Do we even remember

how gma baked her pies? The corn stalks
stretched higher than Holy People
that yr...& we came home buzzed
on lemonade & an auntie's laughter...

Everyone is always talking about
an ancestor that is or isn't
pleased
BUT -

I saw a strawberry moon tonight rising...
I learned the word in my language for laugh...

We eat it.
We setting spray it to the page. (56-57)

“Put on that KTNN” – a poem that captures the reassuring nostalgia of entering the satellite zone of a local radio station – exemplifies Drake’s unique approach to remembering; she forges connections across landscapes, soundscapes and time. When music rises over the static – even in a place where crossing borders evokes a painful history – it’s a clear signal that one is approaching home:

Even today, I know I am nearing home
when the pop music crackles
into KTNN, licks

of fluent Navajo flitting between
Loretta Lynn and Johnny Cash.
They are interludes, too,

for drumbeats and throaty covers
of well-loved tunes put on
by some local boy’s gas station

banjo and hot-rocket guitar,
a strong woman that sings
the seasons over a hand drum. (35)

The radio station gives the same airtime to country legends as it does to gas-station garage bands and a local woman; each song ends to make way for another, and all form a part of what defines the musical signature of the landscape. Music doesn’t erase past traumas, but there is something reassuring about a local station, a familiar combination of melodies consistent throughout time.

Drake’s collection doesn’t cohere around one message or mission; she eschews the logical certainty of remembering or telling a story exactly as it occurred. The poetic and emotional beats are felt most poignantly at the junctures of a variety of musical and sonic influences. The impact initially reminded me of the now anachronistic mix-tape; the musical signature – and the personalized message – defined by the act of song selection, and “heard” not only in the music but in the tiny silences between songs. But perhaps a more contemporary and accurate metaphor would be a DJ mashup; one song bleeds into another – and if only briefly – the illusion of a truly separate music ceases to exist.

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REVIEW

Alicia Elliott. *And Then She Fell: A Novel*. Double Day Canada, 2023. 333 pp. ISBN: 9780385684101.

<https://transatlanticagency.com/clients/speakers/alicia-elliott/>

Alicia Elliott's *And Then She Fell* is a riveting debut novel that follows her transformative memoir *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*. Much like the literary matriarchs, such as Beth Brant and Lee Maracle, who made way for Indigenous intellectual thought and whose work transcended western literary genres, Elliott's prose similarly offers emotional depth that weaves storytelling with the everyday contemporary realities of Indigenous womanhood. As a novel defined as realist fiction on the cusp of fantasy and horror, *And Then She Fell* is a brilliant "wonderwork" as it shapeshifts between realism and the fantastical (Justice 2018). Through universal themes of intergenerational trauma, daily experiences of racism, language loss, and navigating the early days of motherhood amidst colonial violence, *And Then She Fell*, is a poignant reminder of the matrilineal roots that bind generations of Haudenosaunee women and girls.

And Then She Fell begins with a scene where the protagonist Alice is a teenager babysitting and watching Disney's *Pocahontas*. Offering a glimpse into the portals between the physical and the spiritual world and a past-present-future continuum, Pocahontas speaks to Alice from the television, reminding Alice that Pocahontas's real name is Matoaka and that she was only a 10-year-old girl when she met John Smith and was captured by the English. In this exchange Alice reflects on the connection between Matoaka's fate and the fate of Indigenous women all around her:

Maybe the spirit of a little Powhatan girl really was trapped in this movie, inside a story that was never hers, stuck replaying the lies other people told about her over and over. And maybe she really was trying to connect with Alice, another Native girl who felt in many ways trapped in the stories people told about her. In this way, Pocahontas brought to mind every woman Alice had ever known: her aunt with her seed beads and bruises, her mother with her bloodshot eyes and constant work, her friends with her push up bras and

pushy boyfriends. Herself. Women like porcelain dolls with hairline cracks trying to smile and smile as hammers came down all around. When Alice thought about it, even the Haudenosaunee Creation Story wasn't free from this grief; in some versions Sky Woman only fell to earth because her angry husband had pushed her. Was it always like that for women? (Elliot 18)

The themes of Indigenous women's erasure, displacement, and misrepresentation become core threads throughout the novel, and Alice contemplates how dominant versions of the Haudenosaunee Creation Story might also be wrapped up in patriarchal thought. Alice, a fictional character, who much like in her reflections on Pocohontas, offers resonance to many Indigenous women, especially those entering the early days of motherhood. Through the character Alice, Elliot offers a humbling connection to the varied experiences of Indigenous women and new mothers. As a Haudenosaunee scholar of Indigenous maternal theory and Indigenous women's literatures, my reading of *And Then She Fell* can be understood through Dian Million's (2009) Felt Theory, a "model that understands emotional knowledges and analysis as informed by lived experience" (54). I was not unlike Alice, in the days of early motherhood where I felt constantly judged as both Indigenous woman and single mother. Similar sentiments are threaded throughout other Indigenous women's fiction such as Katherena Vermette's *The Break* (2016) and Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree* (1983). Indeed, these narratives offer gentle places for Indigenous readers to land, holding them softly by offering empowering stories that demand the humanity within literary representations of Indigenous women. Like the felt experiences of reading Vermette and Culleton's novels, my journey alongside Alice in *And Then She Fell* was simultaneously affirming and empowering.

My experiences as an Indigenous student, young mother, and Haudenosaunee scholar were also not unlike Alice, whose struggles with self-doubt were justified by the anti-Indigenous racism and sexism that seemed to follow her every move. Alice was married to a non-Indigenous professor studying Mohawk culture and language, who was seemingly extractive in his need for Alice's support. Requesting she attend faculty gatherings with him, Alice found herself in non-Indigenous settings where respectability politics and anti-Indigenous sentiments were intertwined. One such gathering was a dinner party hosted by the Chair of the English Department. In a move to test Alice's knowledge about Haudenosaunee literature, Alice is asked about Pauline Johnson's essay "A Strong Race Opinion: On the Indian Girl in Modern Fiction," an essay that I introduce to supplement lessons on Indigenous feminist praxis. While this scene showcases the epistemic violence that is familiar and felt among Indigenous women scholars, Elliot uses the character of Alice to support us through what Million refers to as a "literature of experience." By drawing on the literary legacy of Pauline Johnson, Elliott invites readers to consider the past-present-future continuum of Indigenous women's literature as both an act of refusal and an act to recall authentic representations of Indigenous womanhood. In this way, Elliot refuses the deficiency narratives that overshadow Alice by reclaiming powerful, women-centred narratives and proposing closer attention to the



matrilineal lessons for upholding Indigenous women's power and place in contemporary spaces.

This legacy of refusal can be understood as a counternarrative that serves as a 'talking back' to Indigenous women's erasure. More than a counternarrative, however, *And Then She Fell* is about survivance storytelling. Drawing from Vizenor's work on survivance "an active sense of presence merging both survival and resistance" (vii), Leilani Sabzalian theorizes survivance storytelling, explaining that "survivance stories intervene into discourses that have long pathologized Indigenous lives" and "refuse colonial scripts of erasure or victimization, and instead creatively confront, resist, decenter, disrupt, and transform those scripts in various ways" (4). Elliot's work aligns with survivance storytelling by rejecting deficit theorizing and pathologizing narratives through a reclamation of stories that centre Indigenous womanhood.

Moreover, extending the sentiment that Indigenous literatures are not defined by colonization but certainly do not ignore the colonial violences that shape contemporary realities (Justice 2018), Elliott engages with Haudenosaunee intellectual thought in ways that acknowledge the lurking presence of colonial violence but recentre Indigenous feminisms through a powerful telling of Atsi'tsiakà:ion, also known as Sky Woman or Mature Flowers. For instance, Elliott offers a story that demonstrates the effects of anti-Indigenous racism and pathologizing interactions, while weaving in Haudenosaunee memories that remind Alice (and readers) of the worldviews that honour the role of Indigenous womanhood in matrilineal societies. Alice wonders, "What if it's Mature Flowers advising me?" (148)

And Then She Fell wraps up in a final portal of the space-time web where Alice understands that Mature Flowers is not only guiding her but that she is guiding all Haudenosaunee women. The sentiment "*We are all Mature Flowers*" (148) becomes a final revelation highlighting the "unspoken covenant of Native women" (326) that ensures we are all caught within the soft landing of Indigenous womanhood.

Finally, as lessons for all readers, Elliot re-stories the Haudenosaunee creation story offering reminders of what it means to uphold the matrilineal protocols of Haudenosaunee societies that honour the power of the maternal and honour kinship relations. These protocols ensure the protections of Indigenous women and girls through clan systems that follow the maternal line. Indeed, Indigenous women-centered stories about histories of Indigenous womanhood reveal important layers of a collective story about the power and place of Indigenous women and girls within matrilineal society, a powerful legacy inherited by Alice and her baby daughter Dawn.

As a justice-oriented call for returning to the matrilineal traditions of Haudenosaunee societies, Elliott offers the character Alice as a way to recentre maternal agency in the story of *Mature Flowers*. In doing so, Elliott creates a story that empowers all Haudenosaunee women, reminding us of the matrilineal teachings where women not only give birth in the physical sense but are culturally “tasked with birthing revolutions and new worlds” (206). Indeed, *Mature Flowers*, as Elliott reminds us, resides within all Haudenosaunee women. This story expresses the essence of what I refer to as Matriarchal Worlding, an ontological orientation that is understood within a process of spiraling backward and forward alongside Haudenosaunee creation stories, languages and ceremonies. Matriarchal worlding, as a refusal to heteronormative violence, serves as an intervention and rupture, and as an Indigenous feminist ontology it gives rise to a renewal and rekindling of Haudenosaunee governance that honours the sacredness of the maternal (Brant 2024).

Matriarchal visions of birthing new worlds are interwoven throughout the re-telling of *Mature Flowers* and offer profound lessons about our past-present-future continuum. *And Then She Fell* delves into Indigenous brilliance and, as a wonderwork, transcends realist fiction and fantasy in ways that confront the horrors of our current world and inspire a birthing/renewal of new worlds. Finally, through unapologetic Indigenous writing, *And Then She Fell* inspires readers, especially Indigenous women, to retrace old steps as they journey toward anti-colonial Indigenous futures.

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