

Celebrating the Diachronic Storytelling Traditions Within Anishinaabe Life and Letters

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Gordon Henry Jr., Margaret Noodin, and David Stirrup, eds. *Enduring Critical Poses: The Legacy and Life of Anishinaabe Literature and Letters*. SUNY Series, Native Traces. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021, pp. 304, \$95.00.

Enduring Critical Poses focuses on Anishinaabe language and literature to explore the writers, texts, and genres that have influenced the field's formation. Organized from multiple perspectives across Anishinaabe inter-tribal communities, the collection achieves a transnational and transhistorical convergence in showing how Anishinaabe ethics and values intersect, how Anishinaabe criticism models tribal-scholarly engagement, and how Anishinaabe critical practice expresses philosophy and aesthetics.

Key words: Anishinaabe language and literature; tribal-scholarly engagement; dispossession; resistance

Anishinaabe literature and criticism¹ have been expanded significantly through the addition of this splendid collection of essays. Edited by Gordon Henry Jr., Margaret Noodin, and David Stirrup, *Enduring Critical Poses: The Legacy and Life of Anishinaabe Literature and Letters* focuses on Anishinaabe language and literature to explore the writers, texts, and genres that have influenced the field's formation. Organized from multiple perspectives across Anishinaabe inter-tribal communities, the collection achieves a transnational and transhistorical convergence in showing how Anishinaabe ethics and values intersect, how Anishinaabe criticism models tribal-scholarly engagement, and how Anishinaabe critical practice expresses philosophy and aesthetics. The editors introduce the interdisciplinary framework that organizes the eleven essays comprising the volume by explaining how each essay contributes to an inter-tribal "confederacy" of Anishinaabe writing within which ethics and ceremonial ways of life endure, inspiring recognition of the ways Indigenous literary sovereignty contributes to and enacts resistance and renewal. One of the collection's most significant strengths is its attention to literary and language continuities in the work of historical figures such as Ignatia Broker, Maungwudaus, and Indigenous members of the White Earth Reservation.² In foregrounding their contribution to current debates, and in demonstrating how their political engagement intersected with literary expression, these authors emerge as central figures through which the collection lays the groundwork for a shapeshifting and nuanced literary and legal agency. In its recognition of an Anishinaabe historical, tribal, and literary past, the volume enacts practices of literary decolonization by recovering storytelling models and tribal thought to illuminate how these conceptual tools have become foundational to Anishinaabe literary criticism.

At the volume's critical center are the voices of writers and scholars—historical and contemporary—who have played a vital role in establishing an Anishinaabe literary-critical corpus. These voices include Gerald Vizenor, Basil Johnston, Edward Benton-Banai, and Kimberly Blaeser,

proponents of tribal and literary self-determination whose work has influenced law, philosophy, politics, the creative arts, and language studies in ways that express Indigenous decolonization. Writings by these authors provide a conceptual throughline to the collection, demonstrating how Anishinaabe creative and critical thought materializes from a diachronic center that also makes visible an Anishinaabe philosophical presence. Several contributors use Anishinaabemowin language to underscore the intersections between culture, history, language, and politics to evolve and transcend the confinement of literary studies to disciplinary frameworks. Their essays focus on Anishinaabe philosophical principles and cultural innovations, unifying several strands of contemporary nation-specific theorizing that the collection explores, while also demonstrating how literature is informed by historical and contemporary activism and evolving storytelling practices.

The volume includes an introduction, essays by Native and non-Native scholars, and an afterword. The introduction by Henry, Noodin, and Stirrup situates Anishinaabe literature within the cultural field associated with the “survivance” of tribal peoples. This orientation, coined by Vizenor, has become synonymous with scholarly approaches that highlight tribally specific epistemologies and an enduring tribal presence. The three essays comprising section one expand on these approaches. They explore writings by Louise Erdrich, Maungwudaus, and David Treuer to examine the intersections between politics and language and to delineate how these concepts express an Anishinaabe worldview. In chapter one, Chris LaLonde finds in Louise Erdrich’s *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* a preoccupation with “the aggressions of civilization” that take the form of “government policies, [...] missionaries, and residential schools,” alongside writing that conveys “rebellion” and “discovery,” stances, LaLonde argues, that Erdrich uses to articulate a “different way of knowing and being in the world” (24, 27). Nichole Biber, in chapter two, reconstructs the storytelling authority of Maungwudaus, demonstrating his “moral capacity” and the power of “wit” to imagine “current thought [...] in tandem with the remembered” (37). Pdraig Kirwan, in chapter three, considers the provocations of David Treuer’s *Rez Life*, noting the facility with which Treuer’s writing moves between “Anishinaabeg lifeways, literary and cultural sovereignties” and the “field” of literary analysis (55). Read together, the essays intersect across the categories of history, transformation, critique, and challenge that pervade the collection, highlighting the complexity of historical contexts to the formation of tribal and political selfhood.

Section two integrates studies of language, creativity, and place with explorations of poetry by several Anishinaabe writers, including Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, Kimberly Blaeser, Margaret Noodin, and Gordon Henry. In chapter four, Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez’s essay captures the enigmatic self-referentiality in Schoolcraft’s poetry while illuminating through comparison the conceptual richness of “Anishinaabe journey poems” by Noodin and Henry. Ramirez’s discussion of “On the Way to the Chicago Pow-wow,” a poem by Kimberly Blaeser, all but lifts off the page in its attention to the rhythms, energy, and excitement generated by Blaeser’s style. The energy and connectivity of tribal lifeways are also central to Stuart Rieke’s essay, in chapter five, in its appreciative assessment of Henry’s deployment of poetry to convey a “patient seeing” of the tribal world (113). In comparable ways, Sharon Holm’s essay, chapter six, describes capacities for deep engagement with tribal lifeways that arise in Vizenor’s writing through his attention to documenting the “extralegal atrocities” (121) that survivors of genocide and tribal dissolution confront in government policy. As Holm argues, “[F]or Vizenor, the term [genocide] is justified to describe murder, massacre, and forced removal of Native peoples during invasion and containment under a settler colonial state” (125). Holm shows how “re-stor(y)ing” the past aptly characterizes Vizenor’s craft in making present an “intergenerational legacy of pain and loss” that she argues is central to Vizenor’s creative-critical vision.

How poetry reanimates tradition to bring about political change comprises the question explored in section three by Deborah L. Madsen and Carter Meland. Madsen, in chapter seven, analyzes Heid Erdrich's poetry to theorize its performative power in permitting the dead to speak in order for the poet to give voice to Native bodies stolen by settler communities. Madsen's reading of Erdrich's artistic authority that invests Native bodies with "the political power of human remains" (171) resonates with Meland's theorization, in chapter eight, of archetypal tribal tricksters as agents of secular, spiritual, and mythic change. Meland's voice is especially persuasive in calling for more complex, historically grounded understandings of the ways in which tricksters, such as Naanabocho, represent Anishinaabe thought, language, culture, and spirituality. He argues compellingly for greater attention to the appropriation of Indigenous intellectual property that inhibits Indigenous liberation due to the dismissal and degradation of Anishinaabe knowledge.

The final section demonstrates how Anishinaabe thought in the present may help us to reconstruct our understanding of legacies of dispossession and resistance inherited from the past. In chapter nine, Jill Doerfler's rich essay imaginatively recreates the voices of White Earth residents from the allotment era to show how US government's agents "racialize[d]" Anishinaabe identities to further land dispossession among White Earth residents (196). Drawing on multiple historical sources, including legal cases, photographs, testimonies, and numerous storytelling styles that construct an "Anishinaabe tribalogy,"³ Doerfler explores the tragedy of Anishinaabeg land loss from the perspective of those who experienced firsthand the implementation of government policies bringing about land dispossession. Her essay models at the same time as it furthers our understanding of diverse forms of "Anishinaabe narrative construction" (228), a term that Margaret Noodin uses, in chapter ten, to express the integration of Anishinaabemowin language with its wider intellectual, historical, and philosophical traditions. Anishinaabemowin's complexity, as a language that expresses tribal thought and value systems, provides a critical framework in Noodin's essay for tracing the "spiritual, ecological, communal, and familial landscapes" of Jim Northrup's writing (231). Noodin's chapter also represents a fitting companion piece to David Stirrup's essay, in chapter eleven, that concludes the collection. Where Stirrup finds in plays by Gerald Vizenor and E. Donald Two-Rivers creative work expressing "cultural poses" that "are simultaneously strong and pervasive" but also "potentially damaging" (249), Noodin uses Northrup's "two-culture vantage point" (243) as a place of departure for understanding how the author cultivates a "multifaceted identity" arising from "[l]iving in two worlds" (243).

The side-by-side placement of these essays in the final section signals the wider dialogic engagement that the collection invites: readers may continue to interpret Anishinaabe language and literature from the perspective of "generalized understandings of present-day Native peoples" (Stirrup 2021: 259), or they may take up the collection's incitement to complexity by regarding tribal language and literature as critical horizons and entry points to Indigenous meanings and cultural associations that Anishinaabe literature and letters express. The afterword by Henry and Noodin emphasizes this political choice. In it, they urge scholars to regard Anishinaabe narrative construction along an "enduring Anishinaabe continuum" (Henry and Noodin 2021: 279), from a vantage point that permits researchers to enact "critical poses" that "support greater cultural continuance[.]... an enduring sense of ethical engagement[,] and care for the people and communities we work in and live through" (278). A roadmap to generating this scholarship is provided by the collection. Through its integration of Anishinaabe language, literature, and letters, it demonstrates criticism's role in crafting an evolving tribal literary practice committed to "sovereignty and survival" (Stirrup 2021: 252) while also enacting scholarly vision and decolonization.

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- ¹ The turn toward tribal-centered criticism was inspired by the literary-critical writings of Kimberly Blaeser, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, and Jeannette Armstrong, who argued for the centrality of Indigenous literary and oral forms to the study of Indigenous literature. See Kimberly M. Blaeser, "Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Center," in *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, edited by Jeannette Armstrong (Theytus Books, 1993); Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1996); and Jeannette Armstrong and Douglas Cardinal, *The Native Creative Process: A Collaborative Discourse* (Theytus Books, 1992). Their contributions have built on and expanded the work of several anthologies of literature, criticism, and poetry that adopt a tribal-centered approach, including *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories* (Michigan State University Press, 2013); *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collection* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2008); *Native Poetry in Canada: A Contemporary Anthology* (Broadview, 2001), *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature* (University of New Mexico Press, 1979); *Keetsabnak: Our Missing and Murdered Sisters* (University of Alberta Press, 2018); *Sharing Our Stories of Survival: Native Women Surviving Violence* (AltaMira Press, 2007); and *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* (Norton, 2020); among many others.
- ² The historical recovery of Indigenous voices plays a vital role in revising contemporary understandings of the field of Indigenous literature and criticism. For a project engaged in this important task using Indigenous research methodologies, see *The People and the Text*, <https://thepeopleandthetext.ca/about>
- ³ LeAnne Howe devised the term to explain the dialogic relationship that Indigenous storytelling expresses in its relationship to the past, present, and future represented by Native stories and the multiple audiences and contexts invoked by them. See Howe, "The Story of America: A Tribalography," in *Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Studies*, edited by Nancy Shoemaker (New York: Psychology Press, 2002), 29–50, cited in Doerfler.