

Debra K. S. Barker and Connie A. Jacobs (eds.), *Postindian Aesthetics: Affirming Indigenous Literary Sovereignty*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2022. 216 pages. ISBN 978-0-8165-4626-8. \$29.95 USD paperback.

*Postindian Aesthetics: Affirming Indigenous Literary Sovereignty*, edited by Debra K. S. Barker and Connie A. Jacobs, is a collection of critical essays that examines important Indigenous writers whose creative works are reshaping Indigenous literary aesthetics. Specifically, the essays compiled in this collection provide a critical introduction to contemporary Indigenous writers whose artistic practices highlight “Indigenous systems of values around community, balance, respect, the sacred, and cultural survival” (6); in doing so, Barker suggests, these culturally engaged writers affirm “self-determined literary aesthetics” (3). The term “postindian” borrowed from Gerald Vizenor anchors this collection. On the one hand, the concept “postindian” suggests the development of an Indigenous aesthetics that confronts colonial conceptions of what Indigenous literature should be by “disrupt[ing] the dialectical loop of the white, romantic, voyeuristic gaze” (6). On the other hand, the term “post” signals that these writers are moving beyond this vision of “Indian” to articulate “what it means to be a ‘real’ American Indian in the twenty-first century” (4). By engaging with writers whose work actively participates in the creation of a postindian aesthetics, this collection maps the new direction that contemporary Indigenous writing is taking.

Moreover, Barker importantly notes that as the field of Indigenous literary studies has focused on a small number of canonical texts, this collection aims to extend this critical focus by introducing to its readers lesser-known Indigenous writers in the hope that it will lead to their increased visibility. In addition to familiarizing its readers with a community of important writers who have received limited critical recognition, the collection introduces readers to understudied genres such as poetry, Native lesbian erotica, comics, genre fiction, mixed media art, etc. to prompt them to explore the experimental works of Indigenous writers whose writings are shaping the contemporary literary canon. By focusing on underrepresented writers and understudied forms, this collection not only maps the contemporary aesthetic landscape, but also offers readers new ways to engage with Indigenous literatures.

This critical essay collection also makes the study of aesthetics accessible to non-academic audiences. Barker observes that many recently published books on Indigenous literary criticism are revised doctoral dissertations and thus geared towards academics and scholars. In contradistinction, this collection broadens these literary discussions on contemporary Indigenous writing by appealing to educators, scholars and readers alike. In her introduction, Barker reveals that the contributors intentionally “avert theoretical approaches, understanding that some readers may have felt sidelined by highly academic jargon” (8). As a result, this collection is broad in scope and covers many writers, texts, and introductory theoretical and historical material meant for a diverse readership interested in extending its knowledge of Indigenous literatures.

*Postindian Aesthetics* is composed of nineteen critical essays that explore the creative practices of Indigenous writers whose works contribute in their own unique way to the formation of a postindian aesthetics. These essays are organized into four parts, each of which begins with an introduction that provides an informative overview of the section. The essays found in the first part examine the importance of ancestral stories to a decolonizing aesthetics. The second part investigates the aesthetics of survivance, while the essays in the third look at works that express the quotidian experiences of Indigenous communities. Building on the previous three sections, the fourth attempts to theorize the postindian aesthetics. Each essay generally looks at a specific

author, provides an overview of their oeuvre and life, and discusses how their creative practice is pushing forward Indigenous literary aesthetics.

The essays found in Part I, entitled “Nurturing Culture Through Ancestor Words and Stories,” provide critical readings of contemporary Indigenous works that inspire resistance and cultural survival through their decolonizing aesthetics. In chapter 1, Susan Scarberry-García examines Luci Tapahonso’s incorporation of Navajo songs and the oral traditions of her ancestors in her poetry. She suggests that, through this integration, Tapahonso’s poetry becomes an aesthetic model for a new generation of experimental Navajo poets. In chapter 2, Jane Haladay engages with Jeannette C. Armstrong’s distinctive Syilx literary aesthetics that privileges Nsyilxcen language pattern and worldviews as a means to heal through the restoration of Indigenous art and practices. By utilizing Kimberly Blaeser’s concept of tribalography (a sort of “communal biography”), in chapter 3, Molly McGlennen explores how Blaeser’s poetry produces a poetics that promotes a collective voice (34). In chapter 4, Barker engages with Joseph M. Marshall III’s Lakota-centric literary works and examines how they provide “counternarratives to Western literary and historical accounts that have vilified the Lakota” (12). Barker’s essay puts his work in conversation with Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s theory that art has the power to actualize decolonization, thereby revealing that aesthetics and politics are inseparable for Marshall III.

Part II, entitled “New Directs in Tribal Literature,” focuses on how aesthetics enables writers to articulate narratives about the complexity of identities. In chapter 5, Dean Rader offers a reading of Janice Gould’s work that engages with the triad of land, history and the female body and its connection to identity, which enables her to articulate an “aesthetic [of] survivance” (56). In chapter 6, Kenneth M. Roemer and Kirstin L. Squint analyze LeAnne Howe’s multi-genre work through the lens of tribalography to elucidate the “transformative connections between different time periods, forms of expression, and cultures” found in her writing (72). By pointing to moments of violence in *Shell Shaker* that manifest tribalography, Roemer and Squint contend that Howe compels readers to transform their perception. In chapter 7, Jeremy M. Carnes discusses how Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas blends comics with fine arts and Haida with the Japanese practice of manga. By refusing stable categories of practice and representation, he allows “new meaning to emerge in a renewed form” as a mode of Indigenous resistance (78). In chapter 8, Denise Low explores the ways in which Heid E. Erdrich synthesizes various medias to promote cultural adaptability and survival. In chapter 9, Gabriel S. Estrada surveys Deborah A. Miranda’s mixed-genre, queer Indigenous erotic writings that decolonize cis-heteropatriarchal Indigenous history.

The essays found in Part III, entitled “Art in the Quotidian,” focus on the role of daily experiences in tribal life in maintaining collective memory. In chapter 10, Ellen L. Arnold examines Allison Adelle Hedge Coke’s development of an “aesthetic of labor that reclaims Indigenous bodies” (109). In chapter 11, Siobhan Senier discusses Cheryl Savageau’s *Out of the Crazywoods* and what the editors describe as a “disability aesthetics” (107) that enables Savageau to create a parallel between the “disruptions and trauma of mental illness” and “the disruptions and trauma of colonialism” (119). In chapter 12, Stephanie Fitzgerald explores how nila northSun’s poetry brings the voices of elders, children, and women “out of the margins of (literary) history” (133). In chapter 13, Laura J. Beard examines Ray Young Bear’s autobiographical narratives of resistance that transform autobiography from a self-centered genre to a nation-centred one, thereby producing a literary aesthetics focused on Meskwaki sovereignty.

The collection culminates in Part IV, entitled “Affirming Indigenous Literary Sovereignty,” which theorizes the postindian aesthetics by revealing the power of literary practices in affirming Indigenous identity through the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives. In chapter

14, Daniel Heath Justice examines the work of Robert J. Conley and makes a case for genre fiction as an important site of literary production. In chapter 15, Eric Gary Anderson investigates the work of Stephen Graham Jones whose fiction rests in what he calls “an intertextual badlands, a messy contact zone,” that radically challenges our conception of genre and, as a result, becomes a platform for the articulation of Indigenous identities (167). In chapter 16, David Treuer discusses the ways in which the work of Virginia Kennedy mixes history, reportage, memoir and narrative to compel “readers to engage with Native American presence” (179). In chapter 17, Jeff Berglund explores how Esther G. Belin’s poetry disrupts colonial conceptions of linear history and promotes the interconnection between the past, present, and future in such a way that “make readers aware of the where, the who, the how, and the whereof” (194). In chapter 18, Belin demonstrates that Sherwin Bitsui’s texts become a vehicle to reformulate English syntax to function as and revitalize tribal languages. In chapter 19, Bitsui contends that the work of Orlando White writes back against conceptions of what “Navajo poetry ‘should be’” (209) by pushing readers to move beyond the “orthographic marks of a page” and consider the blank spaces in his work (213).

Read together, the essays found in *Postindian Aesthetics* disrupt colonial visions of Indigenous identities by replacing them with authentic self-representations, in addition to pointing to the new direction in Indigenous literary aesthetics underwritten by mixed media and hybrid forms. This collection makes an important contribution to the existing critical corpus on contemporary Indigenous literatures by introducing readers to important yet underrepresented Indigenous voices, while being written in such a way that makes the study of aesthetics accessible to all audiences. Ultimately, as Robert Warrior puts it so succinctly in his foreword, this collection is a “volume of essays by readers and for readers” (xiii).

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