

Book Review. “Aesthetically Sovereign”—Barker Debra K. S. and Conie A. Jacobs, Eds. *Postindian Aesthetics: Affirming Indigenous Literary Sovereignty*

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Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor announced that “The postindian warriors of survivance” counter the literature of domination with their own simulations of survivance. Contemporary Indigenous literary “warriors” actively engage in the repudiation of “inventions and final vocabularies of manifest manners” (Vizenor, 1994, p. 167) through using imaginative strategies, as they combat the dominant culture’s inventions of tribal identities. As such, the “postindian” is a self-representation of Indigenous identity that eclipses the dominant culture’s inventions of the *indian* (Vizenor, 1994, p. 11). *Postindian Aesthetics* is a collection of essays that incarnates this Vizenorian vision. From the outset, the title and the cover proclaim the outcome. The choice of enlisting Onondaga/ Nez Perce artist Frank Buffalo Hyde for the cover is, indeed, befitting the goal of the project: “a book that argues for a literary canon that resists colonizing stereotypes of what has been and often still is expected in art produced by American Indians” (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, n.p.). With its depiction of a red buffalo posing for a selfie it bespeaks of the rejection of *politics of recognition* (Coulthard, 2014) through a self-representative stance. Postindians “do not have to dress up in beads and feathers in order to be powerful” (Warrior, 1995, p. 115), they maintain traditional values while at the same time reclaim the power of definition by repudiating the “fugitive poses” of colonial fantasies.

A collection of essays published in 2022, edited by Debra Barker (Rosebud Sioux Tribe) and Connie Jacobs, *Postindian Aesthetics* opens with Osage scholar Robert Warrior’s accolade “my favorite thing about this book is the way as I was reading it, I found myself wanting to read poems and stories by the authors featured in these chapters”

(Barker & Jacobs, 2022, Foreword, p. xi), readers are inevitably drawn to leaf through the pages of the book. The collection of essays opens on a few lines acknowledging the people as Native American tradition would have it. A graphic poem by Esther Belin, part of the constellation of contributors to this collection of essays, sets the tone and particularity of this book, and it is comprehensive of various perspectives and introductory of Indigenous voices that are not widely discussed. Structured in four parts and nineteen essays, this book not only brings new voices to the Native American studies arena but also re-enlivens the memory of outstanding Indigenous creative writers who joined the Spirit world. Unfolding either in personal interviews or in academic formal language, the essays testify to the personal bias that undergirds the project of this book. Most contributors display, to varying degrees, their proximity to the subject of their essays.

The book is cleverly structured to a beginner's taste, notably the uncanny parallels with the Native American worldview of to the circle of life, a theme that recurs throughout the book, especially with California-based Navajo poet Esther Belin. The essays are organized into four blocks. The introductory block, which includes four chapters, positions the reader in the initial stage of the cycle. Styled as a series of thematically compact essays, the structure of the book is proportionate and creates an engaging arrangement for the reader. Each of the four parts of the book is prefaced with a summary of the featured essays, both rationalizing the selection and a sneak peek at the issues and artists they introduce.

As revealed in the preface, the seeds of the collection germinated from the papers presented at the Modern Language Association conference panel organized by the book editors, and its featuring of exclusively new material is a creditable hallmark of the collection. Additionally, the rationale for the selection is unmistakable as the essays are all "pieces introducing underrepresented writers and recognize contemporary genre categories and writers" (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, Preface, p. xv). The multifaceted nature of the book is guaranteed by contributions from scholars doing research in sundry fields within the overarching Native American Studies. Their chapters approach Indigenous sovereignty from a literary stance and push beyond the most frequently represented themes of Indigeneity. *Postindian*, as advertised in the blurb, is a "volume of essays by readers and for readers" (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, p. xiii), the book's major premise is showing that the Native American literary "canon" transcends the established contemporary authors, directing the attention of the readers towards "what we have been missing" (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, Foreword, p. xii). The essays are penned by several creative and visionary Indigenous studies scholars, both established and neophytes. Despite the wide range of personal accounts told by the contributors, a common thread binds them all together:

the engagement of contemporary American Indian writers in reclaiming sovereignty through the deployment of postindian aesthetics on the page. Considering the wide arc of subjects and contributions, I will forefront the pieces from each part that the nascent Indigenous studies scholar in me considers worthwhile.

Part One, "Nurturing Culture through Ancestor Words and Stories," inaugurates the conversation. In a purely decolonial thrust, this section highlights the aesthetics adopted by Native American writers, especially language, recovery, and the preservation of tribal stories, established by Albert White Hat Sr. as conducive to "deconditioning and liberation" (p. 11). This prefatory part of the book features readers-turned-writers whose major inspiration is the aesthetic prowess of Native American artists such as Luci Tapahonso and Jeannette C. Armstrong. Standouts among its selection are Molly McGlenn's reading of Kimberly Blaeser's poetry, particularly bodacious in her implementation of the strategy of *tribalography*, a concept that we owe to Choctaw scholar Leanne Howe. Indeed, Blaeser's ingenuity is brought to a new light in her focus on generationality—or bringing things together, as a tribalographic writing stipulates. Equally exciting is Joseph M. Marshall III endorsing the role of a contemporary *wyoka*, or "culture bearer" (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, p. 49), and his embrace of storytelling to preserve of national identity, thus, reminding us that storytelling is situated in the Indigenous movement for resurgence.

The second part, "New Directions in Tribal Literatures" brings together essays that reinvest Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo's platitudinal "reinventing the English language." This part focuses on examining how Indigenous writers render the complexity of Indigenous identity in literary forms, especially in their desire as postindian literary warriors to take up "new directions" (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, p. 56) by breaking out of the fossilized depictions of Native Americans and testify to their desire to achieve sovereignty. Particularly striking for me is Dean Rader's panegyric on Janice Gould's "trailblazing spirit" (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, p. 60). "A Cartography of Healing: Mapping the Poetry and Prose of Janice Gould" by Dean Rader offers an illuminating reading of the Koyangk'auwi poet and demonstrates how "edgy, bold, and groundbreaking her early writing actually was" (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, p. 60). Rader reinvests Gould's metaphor of the "map" as a new line of inquiry into mapping the intertwined histories of land, history, and the female body. Her decolonial sensibility takes place on the page through her brilliant mixing of genres, particularly attention-grabbing in its rejection of generic determination that juxtaposes the restrictions meted out on Indigenous lands, bodies, and sexuality.

The third part, entitled "Art in the Quotidian," takes stock at how Native American writers are involved in postindian aesthetics in everyday practices. It throws into relief

how Indigenous artists nurture creativity in their daily practice through literary and political activism that recalls past projects. I highly recommend this section from the book to those interested in Indigenous Resurgence and its emphasis on cultural revitalization that is engaged in. Personal preference from the essays is Siobhan Senier's analysis of Savageau's work in a piece titled "In and Out of the Crazywoods: Cheryl Savageau's Abenaki Grounding of a Bipolar Diagnosis." Born out of overlap of Indigenous Studies with disability literature, this essay grounds Native American literary productions in the movement for resurgence by proposing writing through one's trauma as a counter-diagnosis to the pathologizing narratives of Western literary trauma theory. Despite being an off-putting topic, Senier's riveting analysis of Savageau's experience with bipolar disorder offers a point of entry into Native American literature from the perspective of disability studies, yet another area where the Native American voice has, to my knowledge, been muted. Additionally, this essay shines in its introduction of the literary strategy of the lyric essay, or "poems in prose," as a form that fares well with the representation of trauma experienced by Native American women. Retrieving the idea of Suzanna Mintz of *lyrical counter-diagnosis*, Senier asserts that this form of writing, which harkens back to Abenaki tradition, "Compresses and expands memories and experiences rather than following a linear chronology" (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, p. 122) allowing, thus, for healing from "trauma of mental illness" that is "closely intertwined with the disruptions and trauma of colonialism" on Indigenous terms (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, p. 120). Senier recognizes Savageau's work as the epitome of postindian aesthetics in its embrace of the lyric essay as "counter-diagnosis," or an attempt at literally defying "the authoritative, linear narrative that would purport to make non-normative experiences *behave*" and its advancing of the idea that "survival is a deeply collective struggle" (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, p. 120).

"Affirming Indigenous Literary Sovereignty," the fourth part of the book, further entrenches Indigenous writers and poets in the decolonization movement through their literature, which is deeply grounded in their tribal practices. "Directional Memory: Esther G. Belin's Poetic Geographies" by Jeff Berglund (non-Indigenous) is a standout for me, so much so the book opens with the writing of contemporary poet Esther Belin (Diné). Through "Male+Female divided" from her anthology *Of Cartography*, the collection of essays heralds a postindian aesthetic of land-based praxis. In a reactionary stance to the colonial spatial violence, Belin deploys her "politics of place" (Goeman, 2009) by staging her rebellion into linguistic and symbolic forms as her poems deploy the expressive power of Indigenous languages. Her defiance of the authority of government documents and institutions is mirrored in her poetic forms that articulate deep relationships with their Native lands, languages, and communities. Read in conjunction with Mishuana Goeman's gripping

reading of Belin poetry in discussion, "Notes toward a Native Feminism's Spatial Practice," this essay succeeds in enriching the discussion of postindian aesthetics and their deployment towards Indigenous sovereignty, literary, cultural, or political.

Intended as a work "introducing underrepresented writers and recognized contemporary genre categories and writers (poetry, LGBTQ+, graphic literature, and mixed media, among other forms" (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, p. xv), the book propels a return to the feminine as through unapologetically feminist Indigenous writers. The spectrum across the gender line is somehow diversified, a straightforward castigation of the patriarchal colonial fracture of kinship, added to the choice of opening the book with a cutting-edge graphic poem by Esther Belin titled "Male+Female divided" with its ironic undertone. The theoretical contribution of the book is undeniable. Though exclusively Indigenous-centered, the collection holds its own among other theoretical books with the effect of profoundly diversifying the corpus of Indigenous studies.

Postindian Aesthetics shines in its attempt at "drawing the circle wider" (p. 156) by bringing into the spotlight innovative, yet largely neglected scholarship of contemporary American literature. The list of contributors as well as the subject of study are nothing short of enticing to Native American avid readers. Some would berate the book for the absence of Gerald Vizenor in the proposed essays since the title of the book owes its magnetism in no small part to the Anishinaabe critic's invention "postindian." However, as the collection was intended as a probe into postindian aesthetics towards literary sovereignty, there is no better way to pay tribute to Vizenor than in showing the outreach of his theorizations. For bibliophiles, it simply offers a list of "new stacks of books and a list of new books to look for" (Barker & Jacobs, 2022, Foreword, p. xiv). Despite the rich diversity of content, the volume, with its circular sequence of essays, invariably conveys the sense of an uninterrupted and smooth reading experience. It is highly recommended to early-career researchers and established scholars alike, as well as those interested in engaging in the expansive Indigenous studies field.

The only drawback being that the essays in this book, whether introducing new names or celebrating more established ones, the rationale for selection should have been more honest, so much so most contributors do not shy away from manifesting their personal connection to the artist they write about. Indeed, the book is, at times, marred by the impassioned tone of the writing, revealing, thus, a certain degree of amity between the "postindian warrior" and the contributor, the book does not fail to fulfill its promise. Granted, this feature does not reduce the academic quality of the essays nor dismiss the artistic genius of the writers and poets discussed. However, this point could have been mentioned from the outset of the book, offering, thus, the reader a forthright vision of the book.

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